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„Písař Bartleby“ v současné kultuře

**“Bartleby, the Scrivener” in
Contemporary Culture**

Disertační práce
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Prohlašuji, že jsem disertační práci vypracovala samostatně s využitím uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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datum

I declare that this Ph.D. dissertation is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

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date

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	5
Introduction.....	8
1. The Troubled Critic of “Bartleby”	18
2. Traces of “Bartleby the Scrivener” in Contemporary Culture.....	32
3. Žižek’s Act and the Literary Example.....	50
4. Agamben’s Literary Paradigm.....	75
5. Bartleby as the Self-Portrait of a Philosopher: The Case of Gilles Deleuze.....	96
Conclusion.....	116
Bibliography.....	124
Summary.....	136

Abstract

This dissertation is based on the observation that Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" has become a popular reference in contemporary culture. Not only in the field of literary scholarship but also in the realm of art, political theory and philosophy, it is employed as an example of authentic resistance to power, a counter-intuitive politics that finds its strength in withdrawal, inaction, and inscrutability. The thesis examines the reasons and motives that drive literary scholars, artists and philosophers to read, interpret and use the story in such a way.

It does so by analyzing the nature of and reoccurring patterns in Bartleby Industry, the enormous bulk of academic scholarship devoted to the story. It observes how the story is made use of outside of literary scholarship by disciplines, such as art and philosophy, that are not primarily concerned with the literary complexity of the story but use it to work on their own problems of politics and ethics. It pays special attention to its popularity among influential Postmarxist philosophers, namely Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze. As the presence of "Bartleby" in the realm of philosophy has to do with a particular function literature performs in that field, in these chapters "Bartleby" becomes more of a guiding thread in order to examine that function. At stake is the legitimacy of philosophical readings of literature. A singularity of a literary text is neglected by violent reading for the sake of creating new political communities thus making literature newly relevant. On the other hand, the use of "Bartleby" brings to light debatable aspects of this particular politics put forward by art, philosophy or social activism in question as well as the uneasiness of co-existence of literature and philosophy on the one hand and the realm of politics on the other.

Keywords:

Bartleby, the Scrivener – Herman Melville – Slavoj Žižek – Giorgio Agamben – Gilles Deleuze – Claire Fontaine – Enrique Vila-Matas

Tato dizertace zkoumá povídku Hermana Melvilla “Písař Bartleby” jako populární odkaz v současné kultuře. Nejen na poli literární kritiky, ale i v oblasti současné literatury a umění, politické teorie a filozofie se setkáváme s „Bartlebym“ jako s příkladem autentického odporu vůči moci, politiky, jež poněkud nečekaně klade důraz na sílu netečnosti, pasivity a nesrozumitelnosti. Práce se zabývá důvody a motivy, jež vedou literární teoretiky, umělce a filozofy číst, interpretovat a používat tuto povídku právě tímto způsobem.

Dizertace analyzuje povahu a opakující se vzorce, jež se objevují v „Bartlebyovském průmyslu,“ obrovském množství literárně-kritických textů rozebírajících tuto povídku. Všímá si, jakým způsobem se k povídce staví umělci, spisovatelé a filozofové. V první řadě ji využívají k řešení etických a politických problémů a její literární komplexnost pro ně není zas tak důležitá. Práce se zabývá popularitou „Bartlebyho“ mezi postmarxistickými filozofy, jako jsou Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben a Gilles Deleuze. Četnost odkazů k tomuto literárnímu textu na poli filozofie souvisí s konkrétní funkcí, jíž literatura v této oblasti vykonává. Jde při tom o otázku legitimacy filozofických čtení, jež odmítají přistupovat k literárnímu textu v jeho významové bohatosti a skrze své zjednodušující interpretace usilují o vytvoření nových politických komunit. Tím činí literaturu relevantní novým způsobem. Na druhé straně se tak „Bartleby“ stává prostorem, kde se zřetelněji ukazují problematické stránky této konkrétní „bartlebyovské“ politiky a komplikovaný vztah mezi literaturou a filozofií na jedné straně a politickou praxí na druhé.

Klíčová slova:

Písař Bartleby – Herman Melville – Slavoj Žižek – Giorgio Agamben – Gilles Deleuze –

Claire Fontaine – Enrique Vila-Matas

Introduction

I

When in the fall of 2011 encampments spread across America under the name of Occupy Wall Street (OWS), Bartleby, the Scrivener, a peculiar protagonist of the eponymous story by the nineteenth-century American novelist Herman Melville became its unofficial mascot. Activists protesting social and economic inequality, greed of the financial sector and government corruption wore T-shirts¹ and used posters² with the slogan “I would prefer not to,” organized public readings of the tale in the park,³ and wrote blog entries about parallels between the story and the movement.⁴ Michele Hardesty, a U.S. literature scholar who took part in the camp, celebrated “Bartleby” as “a powerful narrative for the moment” claiming that both Bartleby and OWS have challenged our assumptions about the naturalness of capitalism and have shown “how a refusal can open up new ways of seeing.”⁵ Others have argued that by refusing to articulate specific demands (something that greatly baffled the media), OWS was just as “inscrutable” as Bartleby and therein lied its greatest power.⁶ What activists saw as Bartleby’s unwillingness to accept the very

¹ Michele Hardesty, “I would prefer not to,” *Occupy Wall Street Library*, Oct 26, 2011, accessed Dec 14, 2016, <https://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/2011/10/26/%E2%80%99I-would-prefer-not-to-%E2%80%99D/>.

² Jonathan D. Greenberg, “Occupy Wall Street’s Debt to Melville,” *The Atlantic*, Apr 30, 2012, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/04/occupy-wall-streets-debt-to-melville/256482/>.

³ Hardesty, “I would prefer not to;” Maryann Yin, “‘Bartleby, The Scrivener’ Reading at Occupy Wall Street,” *Media Bistro*, Nov 11, 2011, accessed Dec 14, 2016, <http://www.adweek.com/galleycat/bartleby-the-scrivener-reading-at-occupy-wall-street/43056?red=as>.

⁴ Hannah Gersen, “Bartleby’s Occupation of Wall Street,” *The Millions*, Oct 11, 2011, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.themillions.com/2011/10/bartleby%E2%80%99s-occupation-of-wall-street.html>; Hardesty, “I would prefer no to;” Lauren Klein, “What Bartleby Can Teach Us About Occupy Wall Street,” *Arcade*, Nov 21, 2011, accessed Dec 14, 2016, <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/what-bartleby-can-teach-us-about-occupy-wall-street>.

⁵ Hardesty, “I would prefer not to.”

⁶ Kaya Genç, “The standing man on Taksim Square: a latterday Bartleby,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2013, accessed Dec 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/jun/20/standing-man-istanbul-bartleby-melville>.

conditions of social interaction and his refusal to accept solutions proposed to him corresponded to their own fatigue of media manipulation and skepticism about solutions proposed by those in power. The occupiers, in short, saw themselves in the position of the forlorn scrivener. The struggle for economic justice in the U.S. at the beginning of the twenty-first century thus found a face in a fictional character from a nineteenth-century tale.

When two years later the protests in Gezi Park in Istanbul, Turkey, erupted and temporary libraries – as a part of the occupation – were set up, the translations of “Bartleby” were not missing. The novelist and essayist Kaya Genç reported that “people read it as a way of protest, metres away from the riot police.”⁷ In his short article for *The Guardian* he describes the action by the performance artist Erdem Gunduz that went viral on social media in Turkey and abroad. Gunduz stood still for many hours on Taksim Square not responding to any inquiry, an action which Genç praises as Bartlebian.

How did it come about that radical protesters in the 21st century be they in the U.S. or Europe, have recognized themselves in the tale that was written in an entirely different social and political milieu? How do they actually *read* the tale? Pondering on the relevance of popularity of “Bartleby” among activists for literary scholarship, Russ Castronovo meditates on the transtemporal unsettling of Melville’s powerful story and the differences between professional criticism and public reading practices. Castronovo considers the specifically “superficial” treatment the story has undergone in the hands of the activists:

Most invocations of Melville’s short story in this context were not what literary critics would recognize as original or incisive interpretation, nor did they exhibit

⁷ Genç, “The standing man on Taksim Square: a latterday Bartleby.”

any of the “mind- blowing” qualities (...) Discussions of “Bartleby” tended toward plot summary, paraphrase, and a cataloging of similarities.⁸

The protesters did not examine the tale in detail; they merely selected whatever seemed suitable - in order to provide what they saw as an analogy for their own situation. Such analogy created equivalences between phenomena that were completely different (i.e., a nineteenth-century tale and a twenty-first century political movement) and thus negated their complexity in favor of setting up correspondences. It is this imperfect comparison that for Castranovo characterizes how protesters and bloggers approached the story in the public arena.⁹ Castranovo shows that a peculiar pragmatic use of a literary text beyond the realm of literary scholarship deserves close attention. He highlights the direct political effectiveness a literary text can gain given particular circumstances of “a world in crisis” which is introduced both as a challenge and validation of the political potential of literary criticism. It is a challenge because such non-literary readings have become more influential than the more scholarly ones. It is a validation as such readings seemed to have affirmed what certain schools of literary criticism has always claimed – that the act of reading is a political act. However, Castranovo does not explain why this story in particular should be chosen as analogical to political resistance in the twenty-first century.

For a companion under the broad branches of an old elm in the hot summer days, when the light breeze ripples the dank hair, and just flutters the end of the white handkerchief hanging over the knee, or for an after-dinner hour, keeping company with us to the borders of dream-land, and soothing the senses in repose, as with the sighings of distant music, or for any other odd corner of time into which a

⁸ Russ Castranovo, “Occupy Bartleby,” *The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, no.2 (2014): 261-262.

⁹ Castranovo, “Occupy Bartleby,” 254.

book, but only a first-rate one, will exactly fit, we recommend Mr. Melville's collection of *Piazza Tales*,¹⁰

writes an enthusiastic reviewer on the occasion of publication of Melville's collection of prose in 1856. Reading short fiction by Melville, suggests another contemporary critic, is a great way to spend free time during summer vacations.¹¹ Another claims that *Piazza Tales* is "as desirable an afternoon book as one may meet," and still another agrees it "must have wide circulation in cultivated circles, and be a favorite book at the watering places and in the rural district this season."¹² The 19th century reviewers of the tale were in agreement that "Bartleby" was, first of all, entertaining and fantastic in the vein of Edgar Allan Poe,¹³ "a quaint tale,"¹⁴ a curious study of human nature."¹⁵ The juxtaposition of a 21st century activist reading of "Bartleby" as a form of protest and the 19th century "cultivated" lady's interest in the tale as a way to "soothe her senses" during the presumably debilitating summer heat is telling. It suggests the not-so-self-evident nature of the politicized reading of the tale. One can imagine that the 19th century readers would be quite confused as to why "Bartleby" is understood as the ultimate example of a revolutionary praxis. This begs a question: How did a text that was originally perceived mainly as entertainment become an avatar of radical leftist resistance to late capitalism in the beginning of the 21st century?

¹⁰ Review of „The Piazza Tales“, *Criterion* [New York], 31 May 1886, in *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 472.

¹¹ Review of „The Piazza Tales“, *New York Churchman*, 5 June 1856, in *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 475.

¹² Review of „The Piazza Tales“, *Boston Transcript*, 6 June 1856, in *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 476.

¹³ Review of „The Piazza Tales“, *Knickerbocker* [New York], September, 1856, in *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 482.

¹⁴ Review of „The Piazza Tales“, *Criterion* [New York], 31 May 1886, in *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 472.

¹⁵ Review of „The Piazza Tales“, *Tribune* [New York], 23 June, 1856, in *Herman Melville. The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Brian Higgins, Hershel Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 479.

II

On May 28, 2016 a Government of Times had a session. It was a symposium-performance that took place in Leipzig,¹⁶ in one of the spacious halls of an industrial complex formerly used as a spinning factory; now a contemporary art venue. The organizers and curators of the symposium were a Paris-based curatorial collective *Le peuple qui manque* (“A people is missing”); the participants included writers, historians, philosophers, artists, literary critics. The session focused on a problem of “presentism”, a concept introduced by the “head of the parliament”, the French historian François Hartog. He suggested we live in “perpetual present,” a regime of historicity that privileges the present over the past and future (unlike e.g. the regime of modernism that was oriented towards the future). The question was posed as to how it is possible to reopen the possibility of the future. In a passionate speech, Maurizio Lazzarato, an Italian philosopher, called upon the audience to refuse capitalist temporality and governmentality that ascribes identities to subjects (nationalities, gender) and to open up another space-time that would create new potentialities. A figure of *Bartleby* was evoked as a symbol of “human strike”, one which does not involve only the work place but also the whole variety of activities and relationships that support the current framework of temporality. In the debate which took place at an inter-space between art, theory and politics, “*Bartleby*” acted as a trope standing for a complex radical political perspective on “what is to be done” question.

The concept of “human strike” was coined by the artist collective *Claire Fontaine*, a duo of the English artist James Thornhill and the Italian philosopher Fulvia Carnevale producing art objects and theoretically informed essays. Indebted to Michel Foucault's and Giorgio Agamben's philosophy as well as the legacy of Italian radical feminism of

¹⁶ A Government of Times, Halle 14, Center for Contemporary Arts, Leipzig, May 28, 2016.

1970s and 1980s, they evoke human strike as “the most generic movement of revolt,” that “attacks the economic, affective, sexual and emotional conditions that oppress people.”¹⁷ Human strike names a movement of desubjectification, it is a strike against oneself, an exit from one's identity (of a good mother, diligent worker, loving wife, active citizen) and all that sustains it. Bartleby is its chief personification:

The radical character of this type of revolt lies in its ignorance of any kind of reformist result with which it might have to satisfy itself. By its light, the rationality of the behaviors we adopt in our everyday life would appear to be entirely dictated by the acceptance of the economic relationships that regulate them. (...) Human strike proposes no brilliant solution to the problem produced by those who govern us if it is not Bartleby's maxim: I would prefer not to.¹⁸

The corresponding art work by Claire Fontaine exhibited in galleries is a brick bat, an allusion to brick bats thrown by radicals, enclosed in a book cover with the story's title and author as if to further emphasize the revolutionary power dormant in the literary text. Unlike the activists from OWS, Claire Fontaine do not even bother to elaborate why “Bartleby” in particular should serve as an example of such revolt. It seems that there is a certain understanding of the political radicalness of this literary text that the artists deem self-evident.

The two examples demonstrate a specific treatment of the tale; one that is non-literary insofar as it cares little or not at all about the complexity of the meaning of the tale. Both understand the story politically; they read it as a tale of powerful resistance against the status quo which – as the case of 19th century reviewers reveals - may not be so obvious. The following thesis explores the reasons for the immense popularity of the

¹⁷ Claire Fontaine, *Human Strike Has Already Begun & Other Writings* (London and Lüneburg: Mute Books and Post-Media Lab Books, 2013), 55.

¹⁸ Claire Fontaine, “Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A few Clarifications,” accessed Dec 14, 2016, <https://jacoblancegalerie.hotglue.me/?downloads.head.14412313868>.



Claire Fontaine: "Bartleby le scribe brickbat," 2006, brick and archival digital print, 178 x 107 x 54 mm, exhibition view - New Ways of Doing Nothing, Kunsthalle Wien, 2014.

tale as a story of subversion. It revolves around the following problems: the non-literary treatment of the tale once it has migrated beyond the realm of literary scholarship and the

ethical and political lesson it actually seems to deliver when appropriated by contemporary artists, writers and philosophers.

That *Bartleby* has become a symbol of resistance for artists and activists is a result of long and complicated development involving the boom of literary scholarship and academic study of literature, the arrival of “theory” with its vexed relationship to literature and art and the political deadlock that has been acutely felt by leftist intellectual circles for the past couple of decades. A political understanding of the story which feels not obliged to explain itself (as manifested by Claire Fontaine) relies on a long tradition of literary criticism devoted to the tale and, more importantly, to its popularity among contemporary left-oriented philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben or Slavoj Žižek. Both Occupy Wall Street activists and Claire Fontaine focus on “I would prefer not to,” as the subversive “formula” which was first introduced by Deleuze and further elaborated on by others. It is the post-Marxist theorists reading of it as a politically radical act subversive of the status quo that allows someone like Occupy Wall Street activists to see precisely in *Bartleby*’s enigmatic response analogy of their own situation. In the same way, it allows Claire Fontaine and the participants of the Leipzig symposium to use it as a household image, a trope to describe a particular radical way of dealing with the present crisis.

How do non-literary readings make literary history newly relevant? How do they challenge the singularity of a literary text? How do refusals of literary interpretation create new, political communities? These are the questions that this thesis evolves around. The tension between the literary and non-literary treatment is examined through excursions into three interconnected cultural disciplines – literary scholarship, art and literature, and philosophy. In the first chapter, the gravitational pull of “*Bartleby*” as a tale of resistance to power is explored via study of *Bartleby Industry*, i.e., the overwhelming

production of commentaries of the story by literary scholars. Indebted to Shoshana Felman's psychoanalytical approach, it explores the ultimate focus and the source of critical investment in the story and the unfortunate destiny of the "Bartleby" critic. While for the literary scholar the story's enigmatic qualities that solicit interpretation play a crucial role, something else is at stake when the story is explored in other cultural realms. The second chapter introduces "Bartleby" as a popular reference in contemporary literature and art. It maps out the way in which literature and art appropriate the story and examines what those cultural events tell us regarding what it is about the story that so resonates with us today. The last three chapters examine in detail why "Bartleby" has become a frequent reference in the works of post-Marxist theory, namely of Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek, whose readings are the most influential of "Bartleby" interpretations by philosophers, at least in activist circles. As its presence in the realm of philosophy has to do with a particular function literature performs in that field, in these chapters "Bartleby" becomes more of a guiding thread in order to examine that function. At stake is the relevance and legitimacy of philosophical readings of literature exemplified by the treatment of "Bartleby".

It is noteworthy that neither OWS activists nor Claire Fontaine are blind to the problems that the use of "Bartleby" poses to actual politics. After all, as every reader of the tale will admit, the incomprehensible, passive and lonely scrivener is an unlikely revolutionary. The occupiers themselves concede that the analogy has its limits¹⁹ to which one Occupy Wall Street commentator adds:

Bartleby, to put it mildly, is not a "joiner." He's not part of the 1% or the 99% but part of that baffling, exasperating minority who refuse to show up and be counted. Outwardly at least, he remains a blank, a zero. (...) Yes, Bartleby "would prefer not to" work on Wall Street if he were alive today, but he'd unquestionably prefer

¹⁹ Hardesty, "I would prefer not to."

not to occupy Wall Street, either. If he's a model for anything, it's individual, not collective, resistance.²⁰

Also, Claire Fontaine hint at the self-destructive and self-damaging aspects of the act Bartleby exemplifies:

Human strike, therefore always strikes partially against itself, and this is why when the historical toll is taken of its manifestations, (...)it is hard to separate the constructive aspects from the destructive ones. It is difficult to bring out the positive sides, because the achievements of this kind of strike are inseparable from the lives of people, they cannot be measured in terms of numbers, wage increases or material transformations, but only in different ways of living and thinking. To the distracted gaze of a superficial spectator, a landscape crossed by human strike might even seem more damaged than radically revolutionised.²¹

Indeed, it will turn out that the self-destructiveness and utter solitariness of Bartleby will trouble any reading of "Bartleby" that makes use of it as a paradigm of a collective political strategy.

²⁰ Austin Allen, "Melville, Irony, and Occupy Wall Street," *Big Think*, accessed Dec 14, 2016, <http://bigthink.com/book-think/melville-irony-and-occupy-wall-street>.

²¹ Claire Fontaine, *Human Strike Has Already Begun & Other Writings*, 56.

1. The Troubled Critic of “Bartleby”

I

To research criticism of “Bartleby the Scrivener” is frustrating. The first reason is the overwhelming number of critical writings on the tale. “Bartleby” has been the subject matter of hundreds of journal articles, book chapters and several volumes.²² John Evelev writes that

the story has received more consistent critical attention than any of Melville's work other than *Moby-Dick* since the “Melville Revival” of the 1920's.²³

The tale's popularity in academia is, however, a recent phenomenon. It was only one hundred years after it was first published in 1853 that it began to be of interest to literary critics. In 1945 Melville scholar Egbert Oliver still complains that “Bartleby” has received little attention from Melville experts.²⁴ This situation changed radically throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s. A conference focused exclusively on the story was organized²⁵ and the number of articles and chapters in monographs rose exponentially. Today, anyone willing to contribute a new critical insight on “Bartleby” is confronted by a number of writings, which it is literally impossible to digest and, as a consequence, troubling questions on the relevance of much criticism emerge. Already in 1981 one desperate critic asks:

Fortunately or no, the articles will continue to appear in great numbers, and the bibliographers will faithfully record the entries. Who, one wonders, reads or evaluates all of these commentaries? Truly, a vast Shining Sea of information invites the student with promises of marvelous ports of call; an unwary navigator will find himself in a Sargasso Sea of redundancy, though, bogged down in masses of repetitive rhetoric, contrived scholarship, and general stagnation. More than 175 articles have appeared on “Bartleby” since 1922.

²² Matthew Guillen, *Reading America: Text as a Cultural Force* (Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, 2007), 172.

²³ John Evelev, *The Tolerable Entertainment. Herman Melville and Professionalism in Antebellum New York* (Minneapolis: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 181.

²⁴ Egbert Oliver, “A Second Look at Bartleby”, *College English*, no. 6 (1945): 421.

²⁵ *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Symposium*. Ohio, Oberlin: Oberlin College, 1965.

Certainly many express worthy points of view; almost as certainly, except to review

scholarship or to signal a point of departure, no one need repeat any of those views again.²⁶

In his book-length treatment of “Bartleby” criticism *The Silence of Bartleby* (1989), Dan McCall coins the phrase “Bartleby Industry” indicating that “Bartleby” scholarship is a thriving discipline on its own, but also pointing out its rather mechanical character. The notion of “industry” implies a commercial enterprise where what is at stake is quantity rather than quality or “use value.”

Nevertheless, another perspective can also be taken. The bulk of repetitive criticism that makes apparent the urge of contemporary academia to publish a lot for self-advancement also points out the power of “Bartleby”, i.e., whatever makes the critic choose precisely this story for an interpretive act. Perhaps the rise of the critical literature on “Bartleby” allows us to make the same claim about the story as Shoshana Felman makes about Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*:

If the strength of literature could be defined by the intensity of its impact on the reader, by the vital energy and power of its *effect*, *The Turn of the Screw* would doubtless qualify as one of the strongest – i.e., most *effective* – texts of all time, judging by the quantity and intensity of the echoes it has produced, of the critical literature to which it has given rise.²⁷

This naturally poses a question of the (poetic) source of such an effect. What creates the “‘Bartleby’ effect”? What, after all, drives so many people to write about it, in particular?

The second reason why it may be discouraging to research “Bartleby” criticism is that there seems to be no critical consensus on what the story is about. The many interpretations often differ radically if they do not directly contradict each other. Already in 1962, George Bluestone felt the need to “classify” the different readings. Till then, he claims, “Bartleby” was perceived mainly as

(1) a tale of exorcism, in which Bartleby figures as surrogate for Melville, the artist protesting the killing demands of hack work; (2) of psychosis, a classic case of depression, or catatonic schizophrenia, with overtones of homosexuality; (3) of the alter ego, Bartleby as

²⁶ William J. Burling, “Commentary on ‘Bartleby’: 1968-1979,” *Arizona Quarterly*, no. 37 (1981): 354.

²⁷ Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 143.

a projection of the death-urge in the Lawyer, a kind of early 'Secret Sharer'; (4) of social criticism, a critique of industrial America symbolized by an implacable Wall Street.²⁸

To which Milton Stern in 1979 adds:

the Gestalt in which the tale is seen as a metaphysical treatise in which man is a homeless wanderer in a universe of indifference, meaninglessness, and absence of moral point or purpose.²⁹

The diversity of mutually conflicting interpretations makes visible the story's "protean shape" (to use Stern's term) which absorbs seemingly any value or thought system. Branka Arsić, in her "Bartleby" monograph, even writes that in the case of "Bartleby" "any interpretation will apply, it is a matter of giving form to the unformed."³⁰

II

So what of the indeterminacy of "Bartleby?" What makes it such a Rorschach blot? The most evident reason for the absorptive capacity of the story is its hollow and ghostly chief character. Bartleby cannot be said to express himself in any meaningful and intelligible way and, thus, lacks the dimension of an inner dimension or sphere to his existence. The questions Who? What? Why? remain unanswered; his motivations remain opaque. As a mysteriously stubborn, and ultimately self-destructive character, he remains a disturbing enigma, a blind spot at the heart of the text. The consequence of this is, as John Evelev writes, that "no critical reading of the story can offer any insight into Bartleby's condition that isn't highly speculative."³¹ This indeterminacy at the core of the tale is further intensified in how we do not witness Bartleby's presence directly, the only access is granted by the witness account of the narrator-lawyer. It is the question of his reliability that determines in a decisive way our reading of "Bartleby."

²⁸ George Bluestone quoted in Milton R. Stern, "Towards Bartleby the Scrivener," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Herman Melville* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 15.

²⁹ Milton R. Stern, "Towards Bartleby the Scrivener," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Herman Melville*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 15.

³⁰ Branka Arsić, *Passive constitutions, or, 7 1/2 times Bartleby* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 10.

³¹ Evelev, *The Tolerable Entertainment*, 184.

According to James Machor, contemporary reviewers of the story uniformly regarded the lawyer's view as an authoritative and a trustworthy one. Machor explains this in how they equated authorial and narrative perspectives, i.e. they identified the lawyer's voice with Melville's.³² The majority of twentieth-century readings of the story, however, tend to identify with Bartleby against the lawyer.³³ Let us take, for instance, a collection of papers from the first conference of the Melville Society of America that focused precisely on "Bartleby", which was published in 1966. The papers follow different interpretive and critical strategies that reflect critical fashions of the time – more conservative trends of historical research but also those of a more experimental kind, tearing "Bartleby" from its immediate context. Some critics understand the story in terms of Melville's artistic development (A.W. Plumstead, "Melville's Venture into a New Genre"³⁴) or of Melville's philosophical interests (Mario L. D'Avanzo, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and Carlyle"³⁵). Others derive their interpretation from Melville's other works, read it as an important precursor to modernist aesthetics and the Zeitgeist (Maurice Friedman, "Bartleby and the Modern Exile,"³⁶ Marjorie Dew, "The Attorney and the Scrivener"³⁷) or see it as an attack on shallow and conventional Christianity (William Bysshe Stein, "Bartleby: The Christian Conscience"³⁸). What is most striking, however, is that despite the diversity of approaches, the basic reading pattern remains the same. For all of these critics, the lawyer is understood critically – as a pretentious character, a representative of a narrow world view and mistaken values. In contrast to that, Bartleby is seen in heroic terms, his uncompromising conduct is a challenge to the superficial lawyer's perspective, and simultaneously embodies a more sinister and disturbing, yet truer and more authentic

³² James L. Machor, "The American Reception of Melville's Short Fiction," in *New Direction in American Reception Study*, ed. By Philip Goldstein, James L. Machor (Oxford: Oxford University University Press, 2008), 91-92.

³³ Dan McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 99.

³⁴ A. W. Plumstead, "Bartleby: Melville's Venture into a New Genre," in *Bartleby the Scrivener. The Melville Annual/A Symposium*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1966), 82-93.

³⁵ Mario L. D'Avanzo, "Melville's 'Bartleby' and Carlyle," in *Bartleby the Scrivener. The Melville Annual/A Symposium*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1966), 113-139.

³⁶ Maurice Friedman, "Bartleby and the Modern Exile," *Bartleby the Scrivener. The Melville Annual/A Symposium*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1966), 64-81.

³⁷ Marjorie Dew, "The Attorney and the Scrivener: Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore,'" in *Bartleby the Scrivener. The Melville Annual/A Symposium*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1966), 94-103.

³⁸ William Bysshe Stein, "Bartleby: the Christian Conscience," in *Bartleby the Scrivener. The Melville Annual/A Symposium*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1966), 104-112.

understanding. Why does Bartleby become the preferred object of identification for these critics while the lawyer is seen in the role of an antagonist, “an embodiment of bad faith?”³⁹

McCall draws attention to the peculiar one-sidedness of critical attitudes towards the tale. His *The Silence of Bartleby* constitutes an attempt to challenge this trend, to reveal the supposed prejudice underlying it, and to defend the lawyer. He persuasively argues that the lawyer is a far more complex character than the critics take him to be; the latter ignore that he speaks with many voices. Most of the interpreters of the tale adopt a condescending attitude as if they stood above or outside of the narrative voice, when in fact what they turn against the lawyer is his own self-critique.⁴⁰ They ignore his self-irony.⁴¹ They judge the lawyer fiercely when it is doubtful that anyone in his position *would* and even *could* do more.⁴²

Thus, it seems that many readings of the story are determined by a bias, of which the critics themselves are unaware. To paraphrase McCall: where does the grudge come from?⁴³ Stern argues that the nature of our judgment on the narrator depends on whether we discern the variants of his tone.⁴⁴ Yet, what makes us (in)sensitive to its oscillations? McCall attributes the general inclination to how today's readers automatically assume that the first person narrative is unreliable.⁴⁵ Yet, as Machor indicates, the concept of unreliable narration was not unknown to 19th century reviewers who, nonetheless, identified with the lawyer (who in their view represented the author).⁴⁶ Interestingly, McCall mentions a class-based antipathy towards the narrator as another possible explanation.⁴⁷ What is at stake is some kind of class hostility, which McCall himself evidently does not share, through which the lawyer, by profession, is seen as a representative of exploitative forces in the society. “[T]he Lawyer seems to be wrong because he is a lawyer.”⁴⁸ Another of McCall's

³⁹ Evelev, *The Tolerable Entertainment*, 185.

⁴⁰ McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, 121.

⁴¹ McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, 125.

⁴² McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, 110.

⁴³ McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, 109.

⁴⁴ Stern, “Towards Bartleby the Scrivener,” 22.

⁴⁵ McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, 106.

⁴⁶ Machor, “The American Reception of Melville's Short Fiction,” 91.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

remarks concerning the bias against the narrator refers to the uneasy relationship to authority figures in general:

Pervasive anxiety about Authority can find a sitting duck in a Master of Chancery whose employees address him “With submission, sir.”⁴⁹

The “Bartleby” critic emerges as a rebel - a priori suspicious of and opposed to power. The self-doubt of the lawyer generated by the arrival of the scrivener becomes a convenient vehicle to dethrone authority by emphasizing its incompleteness or its instability. Through the supposedly errant behavior of the lawyer, and the tragic stance of Bartleby, authority is questioned, and the imperfection of the Master persuasively articulated. This hypothesis is further supported by that the lawyer is often perceived as a representative of whatever is seen as a ruling ideology (conventional religiosity, capitalism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, rationalism, etc.).

McCall shows that it is possible to read the lawyer in ways that are more just to his individual character: to see him more favorably and sympathetically. It is peculiar, however, that his final interpretative conclusions, still repeat the reading pattern in which Bartleby disturbs the lawyer (and presumably also the reader) into a truer understanding of life (in McCall's case this moment is characterized as religious reawakening). Even here, then, the lawyer represents a limited world-view. For the vast majority of the critics, observes Stern, Bartleby represents a point where the lawyer's self-perception disintegrates (forever or only temporarily), a point opening up to a more comprehensive apprehension that, however, always merely translates into the critic's world view.⁵⁰ When browsing through the Bartleby Industry, the story seems more and more like a projection screen that ultimately only reflects back the reader's deepest theoretical, philosophical, or religious convictions. Stern warns that

[t]he critical literature concerning “Bartleby” exposes the process of interpretative criticism as very often a narcissistic operation in which each reader sees the tale as a mirror of the Gestalt within his own mind.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby*, 112.

⁵⁰ Stern, “Towards Bartleby the Scrivener,” 16.

⁵¹ Stern, “Towards Bartleby the Scrivener,” 13.

And he adds, the story is “one of the weird pieces in which readers find whatever they came to seek.”⁵² Perhaps such exposure of criticism of “Bartleby” as “a narcissistic operation” is unavoidable. For it is the void of Bartleby which emerges as the ultimate focus and the source of the gravitational pull of critical investment. This is also evidenced by the fact that it is always the most crucial and most important terms of the various belief systems, which Bartleby eventually materializes.⁵³

III

McCall’s observation regarding the bias against the lawyer is based on a close-reading of “Bartleby” and Bartleby Industry. He suggests that this prejudice might be due to the class antagonism of the scholars or their unconscious grudge against authority in general but he does not elaborate on these findings any further.

In comparison, the Melville Scholar John Evelev, who references the McCall’s book as a point of departure,⁵⁴ delves deeper into the class twist of much of the hostility. Like McCall, Evelev sees the critical tendency as a result of an unconsciously operating prejudice but approaches the “Bartleby” phenomenon from a more theoretical perspective: from a sociological point of view. In his Pierre Bourdieu-inspired analysis of the more recent criticism, Evelev notes that the status of a lawyer is antithetical to that of a humanities professor. While the former enjoys greater economic reward and a low autonomy (from the market forces), the professor’s situation is completely reversed (low economic reward, great autonomy). The criticism of the story thus offers an

⁵² Stern, “Towards Bartleby the Scrivener,” 14.

⁵³ For psychoanalytic critics Bartleby usually stands for the unconscious, for religiously oriented criticism Bartleby represents central figures such as Christ or Buddha. For deconstructionist criticism Bartleby is an agent of *différance*. For an example of psychoanalytical criticism of “Bartleby” see Nancy Blake, “Mourning and Melancholia in ‘Bartleby’,” *Delta*, no. 7 (1978): 155-68; Ted Billy, “Eros and Thanatos in ‘Bartleby’,” *Arizona Quarterly*, no. 31 (1975): 21-32. For Buddhist readings see Sabura Yamaya, “The Stone Image in Melville’s *Pierre*,” *Studies in English Literature*, no. 24 (September, 1957): 31-58; Walter Sutton, “Melville and the Great Stone Budd,” *Prairie Schooner*, no. 34 (Summer, 1960): 128-133. For Bartleby as Christ see H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 126-133, 151; Donald M. Fiene, “Bartleby the Christ,” in *Studies in the Minor and Later Works of Melville*, ed. Raymona E. Hull (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), 18-23. For a deconstruction-inspired reading see John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), 137.

⁵⁴ Evelev, *The Tolerable Entertainment*, 185.

opportunity to assert the moral superiority of the humanities professor over the lawyer.⁵⁵ Bartleby, in turn, is celebrated as a hero of individual autonomy and resistance towards market values. What lurks behind, writes Evelev, is the insecurity of American humanities scholars over their own vocational choice. In their readings praising Bartleby, the critics repeat and anxiously confirm what has led them to pursue their academic careers devoid of social and economic recognition.⁵⁶ The general patterns, whereby the tale is understood, then result from unspoken and disavowed assumptions defined by the socially determined ethos and habitus. Evelev thus positions himself within the field of sociology of art in which aesthetic judgments are more likely to be seen to reflect social status rather than to respond to qualities of the works.

It may seem problematic to see in literary interpretations merely the results of the social dynamics that operate outside the text in question. Such an approach can rightly be accused of sociological reductionism that, moreover, problematically places one in the superior position of an outsider stressing her own distance from the field (of literary studies). It may seem crude and in many cases inaccurate to reduce critics' understanding of the story to their social background. Yet, how does one account for the reoccurring patterns of reading the tale, i.e., affinity with the scrivener and antagonism toward the lawyer, that seem contingent, irrational and are not reflected by the majority of the critics who pursue such readings? Given there is a logic to this pattern, it is inevitable that these must stem from disavowed motives and urges.

A sociological approach may, indeed, cast light on some of the reasons why the story is appreciated the way it is. It is quite another thing, however, to claim that it provides us with a total explanation of the logic of the interaction between the tale and its readers. Consequently, the appreciation of a work of art is nothing more than an effect of the cultural field. This is, unfortunately, what lurks behind Evelev's explication. Granted that class bias may play a role in tendencies in the tale's reception, it should not diminish the particular critical insights and

⁵⁵ Evelev, *The Tolerable Entertainment*, 187-188.

⁵⁶ Evelev, *The Tolerable Entertainment*, 183.

understandings that some of the scholars derive from the text and which cannot be explained by class prejudice.

Bourdieu-inspired sociological approach may be one way for accounting for these seemingly contingent impulses. Psychoanalysis is certainly another. More, it may theoretically anchor McCall's correct, yet somewhat vague observation concerning the uneasy attitude of many critics towards the lawyer as the authority figure. The work of the Lacan-influenced literary theoretician, Shoshana Felman, is, relevant in this respect. She is one of the few critics who have attempted to treat the history of critical responses to a literary work as an object of analysis in its own right. In her essay on the criticism of Edgar Allan Poe's oeuvre, she proposes

an analytically informed reading of literary history itself, inasmuch as its treatment of Poe obviously constitutes a (literary) *case history*. Such a reading has never, to my knowledge, been undertaken with respect to any writer; never has literary history itself been viewed as an analytical object, as a subject for psychoanalytical interpretation. And yet it is overwhelmingly obvious, in a case like Poe's, that the discourse of literary history itself points to some unconscious determinations that structure it but of which it is not aware.

What is the unconscious of literary history?⁵⁷

While examining the critical reception of James's novella *The Turn of the Screw*, Felman describes a phenomenon of "the reading effect" in which critics often reproduce, formally or thematically, the structures, language, or concerns of the writers they write about. Much of the tale's criticism, Felman claims, employs the story's vocabulary of possession and salvation. It actually incorporates the thematic concerns of the story it analyzes. She writes,

The scene of the critical debate is thus a *repetition* of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it*. Through its very reading, the text so to speak, acts itself out. As a reading effect, this inadvertent "acting out" is indeed uncanny:

⁵⁷ Shoshana Felman, "On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 153-154.

whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but *perform* it by *repeating* it.”⁵⁸

Not only does the critical text explicate the literary work in question, but it also unintentionally partakes in it; it is implicated in it. As critics, we re-enact what we think we are merely describing while our readings remain literally trapped within the text. Our readings keep reproducing themselves with regard to major images, themes, and contradictions. Later on in her essay Felman says that, “[f]or Lacan, indeed, the unconscious is not only *that which must be read*, but also, and primarily, *that which reads*.”⁵⁹ It is in the uncanny repetitions found in critical writings that what we might call the literary unconscious manifests itself.

What does this mean in terms of “Bartleby” criticism? The basic structure of the story is hysterical, as has been already suggested. Bartleby drives the lawyer into self-doubt; the famously “prudent” and “safe” elderly man turns into one suffering from a great variety of exalted emotions while his own assumptions are being questioned. Repeatedly, he tries to account for the stubborn incomprehensibility of Bartleby's behavior using his common sense or the different ideologies of the day - more or less in vain - “Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable.”⁶⁰ The scrivener baffles the attempts to read him made by the narrator and “Bartleby” scholarship unavoidably repeats the lawyer's futile meaning-making efforts. It is likewise driven into obsessively producing hypotheses on what or who Bartleby represents – theses that are religious, philosophical, political, theoretical. Bartleby's silence and inaction provokes an outburst of (hysterical) activity on the part of the lawyer as well as on the part of critics, a reaction that seems somewhat uncanny. As a result, exalted emotions occur – see William J. Burling's desperation cited in the very beginning of the essay. Another critic helplessly cries “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, scholarship!”⁶¹ Bartleby's “I would prefer not to” in its different versions proliferates not only the story but it also “ties the tongue” of the critics. Not few of them worry their heads over the

⁵⁸ Felman, *Writing and Madness*, 148.

⁵⁹ Felman, *Writing and Madness*, 164.

⁶⁰ Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener, A Story of Wall Street,” in *Melville's Short Novels. Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Dan McCall (New York & London: Norton & Company, 2002), 4.

⁶¹ Andre Furlani, “Bartleby the Socratic”, *Studies in Short Fiction*, no. 34/3 (1997): 335.

obstinate yet simultaneously polite utterance. As is the case of James' novella, also in "Bartleby" the critical response is already inscribed in the story.

IV

What makes Felman's approach and her explication of the critics' disavowed motives more nuanced and persuasive than Evelev's is her closer attention to the ways in which the aesthetic qualities of the literary text play an important role in the intensity of the deep affection between certain works of literature on the one hand, and critics and readers on the other hand. She is more considerate of what it is about the literary text that directs the critics' attention to some of its aspects (resulting in the given interpretation patterns). Unlike in the case of Evelev, her perspective can by no means be accused of reducing the appreciation of art to mere effect of forces outside of literature itself.

Felman - when she writes about Poe - ponders on the power of what she calls the Poe-tic effect materialized by the overwhelming bulk of criticism on Poe's oeuvre. What irresistible power drives so many critics to comment on his work? What is the specific poetic force of Poe? Her approach is psychoanalytical; therefore, she suggests locating

what seems to be unreadable or incomprehensible in this effect; by situating the most prominent discrepancies or discontinuities in the overall critical discourse concerning Poe, the most puzzling critical contradictions, and by trying to interpret those contradictions as symptomatic of the unsettling specificity of the Poe-tic effect.⁶²

In the example of "Bartleby", the central contradiction that must have something to do with the story's irresistible power is the following: the enigma of the self-destructive Bartleby evokes desire to articulate what is happening in the story – after all, it is a matter of (the scrivener's) life and death. Yet every explanation, every interpretation necessarily falls short of it (if otherwise, the enigma would simply fail to fuel new response and interest). The blankness of Bartleby is what is most irresistible about the tale, a receptacle to receive and betray the critic's deepest beliefs at once.

⁶² Felman, "On Reading Poetry," 153-154.

Felman is right when she speaks of the “specificity of the poetic effect” as that which is ultimately unreadable.

Many critics are very well aware of *Bartleby's* impenetrability. In their desire to remain faithful to the text, they at once affirm the mystery and violate it. When looking at such readings, one feels an unresolvable tension between the urge to fill this void with meaning, which somehow cannot be left empty without criticism losing its reason for existence (this is the critical “horror vacui”), and the respect for its inviolable nature. The tension is then reproduced in the self-reflective spectralness of the explication as such. The critic affirms the mystery and in her construction of meaning, she takes it into account – as a result, the meaning becomes elusive, and perhaps even eerie. This is a move repeated by many analyses. Kingsley Widmer writes in 1969,

once the reader attempts to construct a pattern of character beyond these sparse facts, the interpretation becomes forced. [...] *Bartleby should* remain enigmatic to the reader.⁶³

Later on in his essay, he nevertheless argues:

The answer to the enigma of *Bartleby*, then, must be found in reading the story in a sufficiently "abstract" or philosophical sense.⁶⁴

Bartleby then becomes “the incomprehensible, perverse, irrational demon of denial, and of his own denied humanity.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Charles Hoffman's reading from 1953 emphasizes that *Bartleby* is inscrutable; the scrivener is then pointed out as the force of irrationality.⁶⁶ In Norman Springer's reading, *Bartleby* represents the awareness of death, “a kind of wall without reason, incomprehensible and blank”⁶⁷ and in Maurice Friedman's essay *Bartleby* stands for the “Modern exile”, i.e., the modern experience of the lack of meaning and tradition.⁶⁸

Studying “*Bartleby*” criticism, one can notice that with time it grows more and more sophisticated, more theoretical, more subtle, and more refined. As a rule, the more recent criticism,

⁶³ Kingsley Widmer, "Melville's Radical Resistance: The Method and Meaning of 'Bartleby'," in *Studies in the Novel*, no. 1 (1969): 444.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Charles G. Hoffmann, “The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, no. 52 (1953): 414-30.

⁶⁷ Norman Springer, "Bartleby and the Terror of Limitation," *PMLA*, no. 80 (1965): 415.

⁶⁸ Friedman, “Bartleby and the Modern Exile,” 64-81.

the more intricate treatment of the tension, the more spectral the interpretation. For instance, Naomi Reed, in her Marxist reading of the tale, focuses on Bartleby's elusive and ghostly character and relates it to the eeriness of abstraction that lies at the heart of the capitalist circulation of goods. Bartleby's unintelligibility then becomes his "resistance to relations of equivalence."⁶⁹ Todd Davis calls Bartleby a figure of the Kantian transcendent, meaning our understanding of Bartleby lies outside "the limits of possible experience, beyond the immanent, in the realm of that which we do not know."⁷⁰ One of the most vertiginously self-reflective interpretations comes from the pen of Dieter Meindl, who explains that Bartleby represents the signification void of death that cannot be penetrated and that manifests itself precisely through the obstinate effort by critics to inscribe meaning into it, which however, only "serves but to diversify the contours of the void as which he [Bartleby] figures in the tale."⁷¹ The void is indeed assigned a meaning: it is defined as the impenetrable space of death becoming perceptible through the obstinate effort of critics to assign it a meaning. In order to escape one's own interpretive violence and to respect the enigma at the heart of the story, the critic, cornered by the text in his interpretive crusade, starts to revolve around the emptiness in circles that threaten to end in a *mise-en-abyme*. This is the fate of the troubled critic of Bartleby, hunted by the void: she becomes a witness to his own interpretive violence as her beliefs are either enacted on the Bartlebian screen or gets caught up in a vortex of self-reflection.

V

A peculiar combination of high abstraction and interpretive violence is very much present in a landslide of theoretical appropriation of Bartleby that resulted out of Gilles Deleuze's influential essay "Bartleby; or, The Formula."⁷² We have seen some of today's most prolific theorists – including Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as well as their many

⁶⁹ Naomi C. Reed, "The Specter of Wall Street: 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' and the Language of Commodities," *American Literature*, no. 76 (2004): 265.

⁷⁰ Todd F. Davis, "The Narrator's Dilemma in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener': The Excellently Illustrated Re-Statement of a Problem," *Studies in Short Fiction* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 183.

⁷¹ Dieter Meindl, "Bartleby and Death," in *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 64.

⁷² Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (New York: Verso, 1998), 68-91.

commentators – to form yet another branch on the massive, ever blossoming tree of reception of Melville's story. For these post-Marxist thinkers “Bartleby” stands as a relevant figure on which to model a new, radical politics for the new era.

When writing about earlier Marxist approaches, Naomi C. Reed divides them into two main trends. First, there are the earlier, more thematic readings, often treating the text as a simple allegory of the inhumanity of life under capitalism, with Bartleby as a synecdoche for an exploited working class. The second more historicist line, treats the story as a critical commentary on the state of the proletariat and class struggle in New York during the 1840s and 1850s. What these two main currents have in common, their important differences notwithstanding, is a marked tendency towards ignoring the complexity of the text in favor of extrapolating a clear political message. To Reed, what is thus inevitably lost is a “sense of the story's weirdness.”⁷³

The post-Marxist readings manifest much greater sophisticatedness as they are immersed in highly abstract reasoning circulating precisely around the apparent incomprehensibility of the story's main character. At the same time, like their predecessors, they are highly reductive for the sake of delivering an ethical and political lesson. What sets them apart as a tradition in its own right, however, is their focus on Bartleby's utterance “I would prefer not to” in particular and their insistence on its positive, emancipatory aspects. Bartleby is no longer a victim of the exploitative system, on the contrary, Bartleby's generic reply is here treated as an *active*, revolutionary force. This has led to some viewing his stance as a possible ideal for a liberatory politics of today, either as part of a larger strategy or in itself.

⁷³ Reed, “The Specter of Wall Street: ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’ and the Language of Commodities,” 247.

2. Traces of “Bartleby the Scrivener” in Contemporary Culture

I

Herman Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener” is undoubtedly a classic, a productively ambiguous text, reinvented and understood in new ways by each generation. Recently, however, it has become an overdetermined cultural sign. Not only did the text give rise to the Bartleby Industry in the field of literary scholarship, but it has also become a common allusion in contemporary cultural productions and, importantly, has come to exemplify ethical and political agency in theory and philosophy. As the title of this chapter suggests, we wish to confine ourselves to the realm of literature and art, more precisely, the way the story is present as an explicit allusion, one of the strategies through which other works intentionally manifest themselves as inter-textual constructs, consciously and deliberately indebted to other texts. At the same time, however, “Bartleby the Scrivener” also exists in these artistic productions in less evident ways that seem to emerge only when we examine our material exclusively from the point of view of the original narrative. Its various aspects, be they thematic or formal, then appear in variously thwarted shapes. In this chapter, we shall examine the inter-textual relations between the story and the inspired works, the explicit allusions, the more implicit processes and the way they naturally interact. Also, we shall focus on what reading of the original thus emerges, the kind of pattern this canonical story is transformed into, and ways in which it survives in contemporary culture.

All of the works that are going to be analyzed here share a sense that all forms have been already used up, and what remains for the artist is merely to manipulate previous creations. Such a sensibility of exhausted possibilities has been described as characteristic for a certain tendency in contemporary literature, for instance, by John Barth who calls it the “literature of exhaustion.”⁷⁴ To describe more precisely what he means, Barth points to an impressive picture drawn by Jorge L. Borges in a short story entitled “The Library of Babel”. The latter portrays a vertiginous and

⁷⁴ John Barth, “Literature of Exhaustion,” in *Postmodern literary theory: an anthology*, ed. Lucy Niall (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 310.

labyrinthine space, an infinitely great library of all possible books written in all possible languages. It thus contains all that is sayable about the world as well as every possible falsehood or nonsense. More, we are introduced to a collection, the totality of which is impossible to know. What remains is only frustration over how whatever one might write or say has already been written.

In the 1980's, Frederic Jameson discussed such a sense of exhaustion as a symptom of a cultural paradigm of “postmodernism”, a phenomenon that, according to Jameson, has emerged in and is complicit with the era of late capitalism, the consumerism of the post-WWII society, a somewhat impotent reaction against the modernist tradition, in particular, its rise to a canonical status in academia. In an essay called “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” he writes the following:

This is yet another sense in which the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds – they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the unique ones have been thought of already. So the weight of the whole modernist aesthetic tradition – now dead – also 'weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,' as Marx said in another context.⁷⁵

Jameson insists that the postmodern artist no longer believes in a unique subjectivity that creates unmistakable styles (owing to, among others, the poststructuralist critique of subjectivity). To be innovative or seek anything original seems impossible.⁷⁶

The creative impotence of postmodern cultural practice manifests itself as a specific cultural pattern, benign “pastiche” as opposed to subversive parody. Parody parasites on the unique and peculiar style and language of an art work, which, despite some necessary covert sympathy, is mocked and ridiculed in relation to what is considered as the norm of language or style.⁷⁷ However, since the postmodern artist no longer assumes that there is anything like a linguistic norm to which we could have a recourse while mocking the tradition, parody has been replaced by pastiche.

⁷⁵ Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 285.

⁷⁶ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 286.

⁷⁷ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 284.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a particular or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language; but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.⁷⁸

To introduce the overall atmosphere out of which such practices have emerged, Jameson, in the very same essay, portrays the disorienting architecture of the Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles as a figure of the postmodern hyperspace. Some of the features he discusses immediately bring to mind the Borgesian library, in particular, its decenteredness, the chaos and confusion of those who happen to inhabit it. In both, the actual living space seems insignificant and does not reflect the physical and emotional needs of the dwellers. The librarians actually live in two small closets, one serves as a bathroom while the other functions as a bedroom in which one must sleep standing up.⁷⁹ The hotel rooms, on the other hand, are, in Jameson's own words

visibly marginalized: the corridors in the residential sections are low-ceilinged and dark, most depressingly functional indeed, while one understands that the rooms – frequently redecorated – are in the worst taste.⁸⁰

In both of these structures, it seems impossible to seize the volume of the space or actively appropriate it according to one's needs, both overwhelm and intimidate its human dweller who lacks the capacities to grasp her own position.⁸¹ And, as the architecture of the hotel is for Jameson analogous to the global communicational chaos that disorients us, Gene Bell-Villada reads in the “Library of Babel”

[a] sense of things long overripe and of a culture weary with itself, a feeling that everything has been tried and that nothing will ever work – all of it bringing a steady increase in

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel,” trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths. Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1964), 52.

⁸⁰ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society, 290.

⁸¹ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society, 291.

madness, suicides, and physical violence among librarians, a social landscape somewhat resembling the contemporary Western world.⁸²

As critics have pointed out, Jameson's account, while indeed insightful, seems controversial.⁸³ One problematic aspect is that it is difficult to deny certain recent works of art and literature a unique and unmistakable language (one could think, for instance, of Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, Winfried G. Sebald, George Perec). While Jameson's analyses of contemporary architecture, literature and art undoubtedly imply that cultural productions give us an important insight into the contemporary socio-historical reality, the real stake is his claim that their neutral recycling of past forms simultaneously marks an absolute abdication from relevant critique of this reality.⁸⁴ What interests us is precisely the question of critical potential of the cultural productions we shall analyze and the role of Bartlebian allusions in it.

In contrast to Jameson's doubt over the unique voice of postmodern literature, John Barth, in his above mentioned essay, celebrates Borges' victory for the latter was able to confront „ultimacies“ and employ them in his writing in such a way, that he, indeed, gave birth to a unique work of literature. Consequently, a true genius is for Barth

an artist [who] may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work – paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation.⁸⁵

⁸² Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Borges and his fiction. A guide to his mind and art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 121.

⁸³ See, e.g., Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

⁸⁴ According to Jameson, the whole culture is complicit with the dominant ideology, its loss of historicity and confusion of the hyperspace. It, however, remains unclear what makes possible the crucial insight into the status quo offered by postmodern architecture, literature or art. As Lambert Zuidervaat rightly argues: “The problem here is that Jameson's location within postmodern culture is ill-defined. His desire to give “a genuinely historical and dialectical analysis” is not a postmodern impulse. According to his own analysis, postmodern culture displays sheer discontinuity and a loss of historical depth. If Jameson's analysis is correct, then are there any sources or tendencies within postmodern culture that make such an analysis possible? Perhaps the analysis is living on borrowed time, so to speak, drawing upon a Marxist tradition amid the death of all traditions. If so, then the political prospects for such an analysis seem bleak. Or perhaps the analysis is made possible by certain oppositional forces alive within postmodern culture. If this were so, however, one would expect Jameson to show more sympathy for the traditional Marxist project of specifically evaluating the relative political merits of existing cultural phenomena.” See Lambert Zuidervaat, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory. The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 262.

⁸⁵ John Barth, “Literature of Exhaustion,” 317.

Writing out of and about the impossibility of creativity and innovation might be a somewhat ghostly task, the work is constantly emptied (hunted) by the void of its source or its themes. Precisely such vacuity and hollowness will decisively mark the works we shall analyze. Theodor W. Adorno, unlike Jameson, believed that such works – exemplified for him particularly by Beckett's writing – occupy a privileged position in terms of critique and provide us with a “precise, wordless polemic” against “a nonsensical world.”⁸⁶ In the labyrinthine and weary world of missed possibilities and neglected human needs to be a true artist means to create phantomatic texts in accordance with Borges' narrator who claims, “[t]he certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms.”⁸⁷ Adorno insists that only such art, “a negative imprint of administered world,”⁸⁸ allows us to recognize the actual extent of our alienation while at the same time offering a glimpse of fundamental transformation: “...only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia.”⁸⁹

II

“Bartleby the Scrivener” is one of the texts that – like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* - hide an insoluble mystery, which is precisely what continues to irritate reader after reader. Bartleby is “always there” but – both for the readers and the other characters of the narrative - never *fully* there. He remains radically withdrawn into a world that remains inaccessible to us, leaving little of the positive one could get hold of. What *is* actually *there* seems somewhat residual – incoherent in speech and rather elusive in appearance.

Indeed, the lawyer-narrator describes Bartleby as the “specter,” “the ghost,” “the apparition,” “the incubus” whose movements are “gliding”; who is, however, most of the time, motionless. Bartleby cannot be said to express himself and, thus, lacks the dimension of an “inside.” His character is fixed and static. While the other figures who appear in the story are more or less

⁸⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Reconciliation under Duress,” in *Aesthetics and Politics. The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism*, ed. Frederic Jameson (London: Verso, 2002), 161.

⁸⁷ Borges, “The Library of Babel,” 58.

⁸⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 2002), 31.

⁸⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 33.

classifiable in terms of class, age, education or motives, Bartleby is free of such versimilitude; he no longer quite belongs to the world shared by the other Charles Dickensian characters. The picture we are given ignores many of the self-evident features of the nineteenth-century (realist) fiction, the questions - Who? What? Why? - that usually constitute the structure of the narrative become, in this tale, difficult if not impossible to answer.

All this is further intensified by how we do not witness Bartleby's presence directly, the only access is granted by the thoroughly unreliable witness account of the narrator-lawyer. Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" thus becomes akin to some of the most recalcitrant modernist writing such as Kafka's fragmentary short tales,⁹⁰ which, in a corresponding manner, allow for various, mutually conflicting interpretations. For instance, the style and structure of Melville's narrative mirrors that of "The Neighbor,"⁹¹ where we find the inaccessible Harras (too fast to catch, observe or talk to, unlike Bartleby who is always *there*) and follow his elusive traces in the supposedly sound judgment of the narrator, which, however, rapidly slides into extravagantly paranoid visions. Here, as in "Bartleby the Scrivener", we feel we must come to terms with a likelihood of misrepresentation and a thwarted image of the out-of-reach character. In truth, Bartleby seems most present in the effect produced by his existence in the narrator's world, the way it marks the shift of the narrator's tone, mood, the thought process, and the dynamics of his narrative style. Thus, Andre Furlani goes as far as to claim that:

[t]he only real character here is the attorney himself. Bartleby is an affect rather than personality – he is a force, almost talismanic, exerting an influence on a character.⁹²

The literary works and the art we are about to introduce obviously do not attempt to arrive at a convincing interpretation of the story or an explanation of its productive ambiguity; they are free of such efforts and it is nothing we expect of them. What thus becomes foregrounded is their evident selective misreading; there are only a very limited number of aspects of "Bartleby the

⁹⁰ The work by Kafka and Melville's tale are often compared. See, for instance, Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or the Formula," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. David W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 68-90.

⁹¹ Franz Kafka, "My Neighbor", trans. Will and Edwin Muir, in *Franz Kafka. The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 267-268.

⁹² Andre Furlani, "Bartleby the Socratic," *Studies in Short Fiction*, no. 34 (1997): 335.

Scrivener” that seem essential and convenient for their form and themes. Thus these productions become a privileged space to explore what it is about the story that is specifically relevant today.

III

Our first Bartlebian text will be Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, originally published in 1978, a vast and complex assemblage of literary quotations and borrowings. To trace the way Melville's short story is incorporated into this narrative, we shall have recourse to a few categories of the structuralist taxonomy established by Gérard Genette that provides tools to determine changes from text to text. We shall see that, symptomatically for Perec's accumulative text, the transformation from Melville's narrative can be classified as a form of augmentation, i.e., contamination and amplification. The former of the two terms describes the situation when

[t]he two stories intertwine, or rather alternate and cross each other.[. . .] The contamination here is well balanced enough to make it impossible to decide which of the two actions serves to amplify the other.[. . .] Those are contaminations between texts, or between texts and borrowings from “reality.”⁹³

Such a technique may be demonstrated precisely if we follow the direction indicated by the explicit Bartlebian allusion lurking behind the central character's name - Percival Bartlebooth. The character of Bartlebooth, like his name, is a combination of Bartleby,⁹⁴ the protagonist of Valery Larbaud's novel *The Diary of A. O. Barnabooth: A Novel*⁹⁵ and Percival, one of King Arthur's legendary Knights of the Round Table, famously involved in the quest of the holy grail. The unmistakably Bartlebian features emerge as soon as we are introduced to Bartlebooth as a solitary, isolated and awkward bachelor-figure who rarely leaves his office room (sleeping in an armchair not bothering to undress), mostly living on nothing but biscuits and ginger cakes. Like Bartleby, Bartlebooth is an

⁹³ Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 259.

⁹⁴ “Bartleby the Scrivener” is a crucial text for Perec not only as regards *La vie mode d'emploi*. When commenting on his own work, Perec talks about novel-writing as an act of filling in the void inbetween different puzzle pieces - literary works. His *Un Homme qui dort* would be thus a link between Melville's Bartleby and Kafka's diaries, the writing of this novel followed his own incessant reading of the short story. See Chris Andrews, “Puzzles and Lists: Georges Perec's *Un Homme qui dort*,” *MLN French Issue*, no. 11 (1996): 775-796.

⁹⁵ Valery Larbaud. *The Diary of A. O. Barnabooth: A Novel*. Trans. Gilbert Cannan. New York: McPherson, 1991.

eccentric reluctant to see anyone, know anyone or speak to anyone for being maniacally focused on some enigmatic and awkward goal. For the reader not to be mistaken, the writer locates a picture with the old Nantucket whale pier in Bartlebooth's hallway.⁹⁶ The ironically appropriated features of the other two characters then provide the information that is missing in Melville's narrative and this is also where the process of amplification intervenes, an operation that attempts to provide the answer to the why and how of the original story.⁹⁷ "Culture hates a vacuum,"⁹⁸ writes Gérard Genette and his statement is rendered true by the numerous pieces of criticism on *Bartleby* that desperately attempt to fill in the missing motive and information on the identity of the character that in the tale accounts for much of the scrivener's ambiguity. So does Perec in a manner that does not remove but instead displaces the disturbing and irritating void. Bartlebooth is known to have pursued a "quest" the nature of which is defined after the character of Barnabooth, a young, wealthy South American who spends his inheritance by going on a grand tour of Europe to achieve self-realization. Like Barnabooth, Bartlebooth also commands a great fortune and, in a similar manner, resolves to make use of it in order to achieve full understanding. He strives to depict and exhaust some aspect of the world in such a way "that his whole life would be organised around a single project, an arbitrarily constrained programme with no purpose outside its own completion."⁹⁹ Without any attachment or interest, Bartlebooth tries hard to make the void of his life the very ultimate life-goal, the aim of his quite randomly chosen life-project. This fifty-year plan, Bartlebooth insists, must be absolutely futile and must leave no trace after it is completed. It must remain "discreet" and not "heroic." Everything must follow the carefully predetermined program, so that "all recourse to chance would be ruled out."¹⁰⁰

The plan is as follows: the painter, Serge Valène, would teach Bartlebooth the art of watercolors for ten years, the latter would then paint five hundred paintings at five hundred different seaports. After finishing each painting, he would send it back to France, where the craftsman

⁹⁶ George Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, trans. David Bellos. (London: Vintage, 2003), 155.

⁹⁷ Genette, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree*, 267.

⁹⁸ Genette, *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree*, 330.

⁹⁹ Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, 162.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Gaspard Winckler would cut it into a jigsaw puzzle. Upon his return, Bartlebooth is supposed to spend his time solving each jigsaw in a chronological order. Exactly twenty years to the day after the painting has been painted, it should be placed in the sea water until the colors dissolve, and nothing is to remain but a blank sheet of paper that is then going to be returned to Bartlebooth.

Thus the absence of motives for Bartleby's withdrawal is here replaced by a narrative that is, nevertheless, dominated by the void, which Bartlebooth, at first, tries to fill mechanically and randomly with a strenuous effort and material production (not unlike Bartleby who, first, „gorges himself” on the attorney's documents) that leads to nothingness, its own obliteration. This strategy marks also the structure of the whole novel that, paradoxically, points to its own underlying void by obsessively and excessively accumulating (according to pre-defined formulas) bizarre narratives, hundreds of characters, catalogues of objects, lists of descriptions but also pieces of some thirty canonical texts - slightly modified.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the words that populate *Life: A User's Manual* appear somewhat uncanny; the more descriptive the narrative, the more filled with objects and people it appears, the more it betrays its own “horror vacui.” The novel apparently shares the ambition of Valéne's to depict and express life in one Parisian building in the greatest possible detail, yet when, clogged with discourse, it approaches its ending, Valéne's canvas, symbolically, remains blank.

Bartlebooth's utterly meaningless but extremely ambitious plan, ultimately fails. The reason of its failure lies precisely in Bartlebooth's absolute self-absorption and extreme narcissism. He fails to take account of others and, more particularly, their incalculability proves fatal to his carefully devised plan. Both stories, in fact, tell us that a radical withdrawal from the commonly shared practices and conventions is dearly paid for, and that others do not hesitate to take revenge. Indeed, Bartleby's fellow citizens do not tolerate his awkward behavior; as a result, he is violently removed to prison on charges of vagrancy where he ultimately “falls into eternal sleep“. Bartlebooth's plan directly relies on other people and it is Gaspar Winckler, who deliberately prevents his plan to be

¹⁰¹ In the postscript of the novel one finds thirty different names of writers introduced with the following comment: „This book contains quotations, some of them slightly adapted, from works by.“. See Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, 579.

successfully completed. He purposefully cuts puzzles so that they are extremely difficult if not impossible to reconstruct and, thus, Bartlebooth dies amidst an unresolved puzzle.

If both stories teach us that such ultimate withdrawal from social expectations leads to tragedy and self-destruction, they also reveal the power that lies hidden in it. Such disregard for the social context and social convention demonstrated by both of the characters, the reluctance to assert oneself in any way in the common space eventually manages to disturb, as if unwittingly, the lives of those who come to witness it. Not to mention the mass of readers and critics obsessed with the two characters, the lives of the painter Valène and Winckler, like that of the attorney-narrator seem suddenly out of joint. True, we do not have such an access to Valène or Winckler's emotions and thoughts as in the case of the narrator of "Bartleby, the Scrivener"; still, their stories seem to suggest that the encounter with Bartlebooth has left their lives torn apart. Interestingly, as a result, both of these characters gradually slide into apathy with distinctly Bartlebian features. Thus, for instance, Winckler, after spending twenty years in Bartlebooth's service, cutting jigsaw puzzles, becomes rather stationary - merely sitting in a chair by the window, motionless. He looks out but not to see or observe anything in particular, he stares out into nothing. He stops seeing anyone and remains tongue-tied when addressed. Valène, clearly devastated by Bartlebooth's death, becomes also absolutely torpid. He lies in bed, stops taking meals and, peculiarly, forgets words and does not finish his sentences.¹⁰² The transformation from "Bartleby the Scrivener" to *Life: A User's Manual* is thus also marked by dissemination where the defining features of a single character in the original story (self-sacrificial apathy, unwillingness or inability to communicate) are shared by a number of figures.

The reason why Bartleby and Bartlebooth exert such a power on their surroundings is naturally open to interpretation. By subtracting themselves thus from the social milieu, these

¹⁰² Not only characters whose fates are directly tied with that of Bartlebooth acquire Bartlebian features. There is also Grégoire Simpson, a student of art who, after a period of working at strange jobs, starts receiving a stipend and spends his time by taking long strolls. In the end, he locks himself up in his apartment, stops speaking altogether (when he goes to a shop for a baguette, he merely gesticulates, when spoken to, he answers with incoherent murmur). Apparently, he spends his days lying in his bed, dressed up, smoking a cigarette and wants to be left alone. Eventually, he simply disappears. The character, in fact, originally occupies a central place in another work by Perec - *Un Homme qui dort*, also inspired by Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener". Perec, *Life: A User's Manual*, 302-308.

characters seem to reveal and expose an aspect of the social space that awakes pathological reactions in others. Slavoj Žižek, in his exploration of what he calls „Bartleby politics“ talks precisely about the disturbing power of Bartleby's withdrawal. He argues that what is exposed is merely the nakedness of the very place, the usually hidden inconsistency of the social order, the void of the real based on which our social world is structured becomes stripped of its ideological veil.¹⁰³ Everything appears suddenly meaningless and arbitrary and what emerges is anxiety in the case of the lawyer, or apathy in the case of Perec's characters.

As above mentioned, Perec's text is reluctant to explore the characters' interior, the emphasis remains on the exterior.¹⁰⁴ The novel engages in rather sketchy portrayals of people, who seem stereotypical and caricature-like, which reminds one of Bartleby's insufficient characterization. More peculiarly, the numerous characters are encountered as if frozen-in-time, resembling people photographed amidst a situation. We rarely hear them speak - the excessively loquacious 581-pages long text is frustratingly silent. Like „Bartleby, the Scrivener,“ Perec's text maintains the radical disproportion between narrative eloquence and the characters' reticence. Like the grandiloquent narrator in “Bartleby the Scrivener”, the anonymous narrative voice of *Life: A User's Manual* is also quite extravagant in his treatment of language: the numerous descriptions of objects and spaces suffocate the characters, whose actions we never witness in the present tense, who almost never engage in a dialogue and who are thus never fully present in the narrative. Instead, they seem to occupy it like wax figures in a museum stuffed with useless objects and adventurous yet hardly believable stories, from which they remain strangely distanced. Their frozen aspect and silence corresponds to Bartleby's tongue-tiedness and his ghostly presence, as if the single apparition of Bartleby was dispersed into shadowy multitudes, the phantomatic nature of all of the characters who emerge in *Life: A User's Manual*, Bartlebooth included.

¹⁰³ See Slavoj Žižek, *Parallax View* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009), 375-385.

¹⁰⁴ Perec was known for his aversion for psychology in fiction: “Je deteste ce qu'on appelle la 'psychologie' surtout dans le roman.” [I detest what is called 'psychology' especially in the novel.] Perec quoted in Gerald Prince, “Preliminary Discussion of Women in *La vie mode d'emploi*”, *Yale French Studies. Pereckonings: Reading George Perec*, no. 10 (2004): 96.

Another Bartlebian text, likewise composed largely of allusions, references to authors and their literary works, is Enrique Vila Matas' novel, *Bartleby & Co*, published in 2001. As the title suggests, and in contrast to Perec's text, allusions to Bartleby in *Bartleby & Co* are more explicit and noticeable. The text itself reflects on the allusion, explains the reasons for using it and the way it is incorporated.

The story takes the shape of a diary-novel the narrator decides to begin precisely after he happens to mistake his boss' surname for the very name "Bartleby". The narrator, a hunchbacked failed writer involved with a dull routine work, forever self-deprecating and self-mocking ("I never had much luck with women. I have a pitiful hump, which I am resigned to. All my closest relatives are dead. I am a poor recluse working in a ghastly office. Apart from that, I am happy."¹⁰⁵) identifies himself with Melville's character or even, we suspect, desperately strives to resemble him.

The novel begins as the narrator, feigning a depression, takes extended sick leave to write a text composed merely of footnotes to a non-existing work of literature. The form of footnotes well serves the narrator's poor self-image as footnotes are assumed to be marginal and subordinate to the main discourse and no one feels obliged to read them. These notes elaborate on those modern writers (existing as well as fictional) who suffer from what the narrator calls the "Bartleby syndrome,"

the illness, the disease, endemic to contemporary letter, the negative impulse or attraction towards nothingness that means that certain creators, while possessing a very demanding literary conscience (or perhaps precisely because of this), never manage to write: either they write one or two books and then stop altogether or, working on a project, seemingly without problems, one day they become literally paralysed for good.¹⁰⁶

Bartleby's enigmatic passive resistance is here understood as a "profound denial of the world,"¹⁰⁷ which as in Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, crystalizes an unwillingness to positively assert oneself

¹⁰⁵ Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, trans. Jonathan Dunne. (New York: New Direction Books, 2000), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, 1.

in it. Yet here, in this text by a man totally obsessed with literature, in whose life the world of literature seems to have replaced the everyday world itself, it is mainly understood as reluctance to produce literature, to affirm the world by literature and to affirm literature itself. Hence, *Bartleby's* situation becomes the ultimate symbol for creative crisis, and represents the doubt over the very possibility of creative production.

Again, the process of Genettian amplification and that of dissemination take place and define the incorporation of the original text into that of *Bartleby & Co.* The narrator continually looks for and collects various motives that lead to such an unwillingness to express oneself,¹⁰⁸ typical of *Bartleby*, which is taken to characterize almost all of the characters of this book (including the narrator). All are designated as “Bartlebies”; the name stands for a category, a type, genus. Included are real historical figures, writers who simply one day stopped writing (e.g., Arthur Rimbaud, Robert Walser) but also those who merely suffered from periods of crisis (Franz Kafka). Strikingly, we also encounter fictional or real individuals who exist outside of the history of literature or on its margins, or, on the contrary, dominate it without having produced anything that would be recognized as literature (e.g. Pepin Bello). Their status is questionable, we often remain insecure as to whether they are actual historical individuals or not, and, more importantly, whether we can call them writers at all. Not unlike Beckett, who believed, according to Ulysse Dutoit and Leo Bersani, that

[i]mpotence, incompetence, and failure, as well as the lack of subject material, do not lead to the end of art; they are instead the necessary conditions for [...] a break with the compromises of art in the past,¹⁰⁹

and in accordance with Barth's understanding of Borges' short fiction, the narrator of *Bartleby & Co* seems to claim that only a research of the very space where writing seems impossible and utterly

¹⁰⁸ “Because it seems to me that the public have the ultimate in bad taste and a desire for denigration. Because we are encouraged to work for the same absurd reasons as when we look out of the window and hope to see monkeys and bear-tamers in the street. Because I am afraid to die without having lived. Because the more my literary status declines, the happier I feel. Because I do not want to imitate lettered people, who are like donkeys kicking and fighting in front of an empty manger. Because the public are only interested in successes they do not appreciate.” Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Leo Bersani, Ulysse Dutoit, *Acts of Impoverishment. Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17.

meaningless, the very grave of literature, can lead to the very possibility of genuine literary production, becoming a catalyst of new artistic forms:

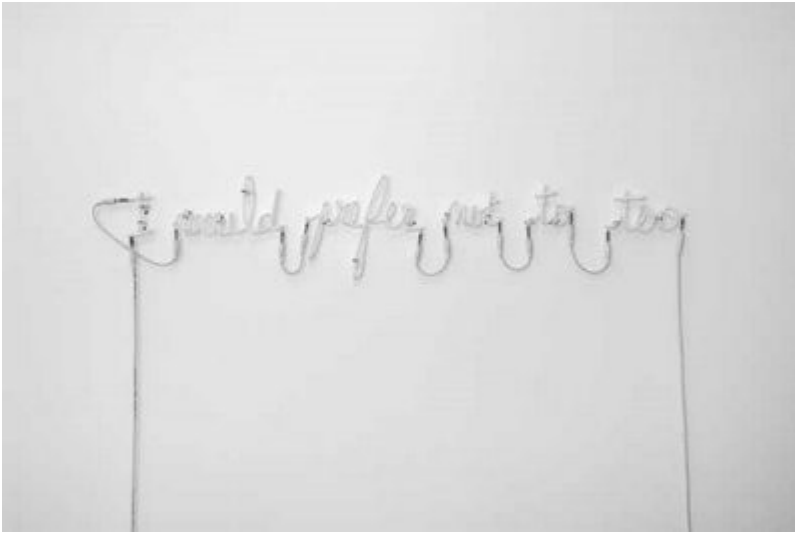
I am convinced that only by tracking down the labyrinth of the No can the paths still open to the writing of the future appear. I wonder if I can evoke them.¹¹⁰

What we encounter as the supposed result of the narrator's effort, is, indeed, not a novel in the usual sense of the word but a chain of allusions. The book has little of its own plot or drama; instead, it literally draws its substance out of other works – both fiction and non-fiction. This parasite further oscillates among various genres (literary essay, fictionalized autobiography, a research paper) and deliberately attempts to blur the borderline between what is generally assumed as literary or non-literary.

The notes, we are told, are supposed to be attached to a literary work (one that does not yet exist) and, apparently, as such are not bound to obey the rules generally followed by footnotes to critical texts. Literary footnotes have their own history and have appeared in such works as Lawrence Stern's *Tristram Shandy* or James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. It is not unusual for such notes to take over the space where we expect to find the chief narrative. Yet, even in the tradition of literary footnotes, the status of Vila Matas' notes remains peculiar. While they actually *replace* the principal narrative (i.e., they *become* the primary narrative), they still insist on being subordinate to something that is moreover absent. Their main reference thus appears entirely ambiguous.

Footnotes are usually expected to provide the text with a link towards both, past and future. The past tradition is connected to the present discourse precisely in the form of a footnote, while the text itself anticipates itself to be similarly appropriated by future writing. In the case of Vila Matas' notes, the present remains empty, it consists of nothing but a relationship towards the past and anticipation of the future. It remains purely as something transitional, a specter claiming to lack positive presence, and reluctant to assert its own authority. Linked to a tradition that has become Bartlebian, it merely points toward what is yet to come.

¹¹⁰ Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, 3.



Etienne Chabaud, "Disclaimer," 2007, empty neon, 180 x 15 cm, exhibition view – Lyon Biennale, MOCA, Lyon, 2007.

An art piece by Etienne Chabaud *Disclaimer*, from 2007, is yet another compilation of allusions. It refers to *Bartleby*, of course, but this reference is “contaminated” by an ironic appropriation of the late 1960's neon art and the tradition of tautology and self-referentiality as it appeared in conceptual practice. In 1967, Bruce Nauman decided to exchange the traditional artistic media for the theatricality and seductive nature of the neon sign, traditionally employed in advertising. Inspired by a beer sign, Nauman's first neon “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truth” was initially displayed in the artist's storefront studio, just like an advertisement on the street.¹¹¹ While Nauman's gesture was quite revolutionary at that time, since then many artists have worked with neons so that today there seems nothing more commonplace than neon art.

This overuse of neon in art becomes reflected in Chabaud's art work. We see a white neon sign that remains unlit although plugged in, a sarcastic commentary on the once so powerful ability of neon art to attract attention. By being dysfunctional and in contrast to other neon signs, the work seems, rather conspicuously reluctant to draw attention to itself. Yet, in another sense, it indicates

¹¹¹ The power of this art piece lies in the apparent irony of the statement that glorifies the artist as the exceptional and omniscient individual by a pretentious cliché that is, moreover, communicated by the mainstream, highly purpose-built medium associated with consumerist culture. The form of the statement and also the context in which it had appeared undermines the message, the latter, however, in an uncanny manner, still remains to hover in the air. The artist himself could not decisively claim whether it was meant seriously or not. Joan Gibbons, *Art and Advertising* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co, 2005), 17.

that in a(n) (art) world where a neon is a commonplace medium, only the neon (art) that gives up its noticeability may, in fact, engage one's interest.

Secondly, Chambaud's neon seems to reference the tautological neons by the “father” of conceptual art Joseph Kosuth. In neons such as *Three Adjectives Described*, the artist forwards a tautological statement and thus lets the work be exactly what it purports. Chambaud's piece, in a very post-conceptual manner, problematizes this process of self-reference by his choice of the meaning to be denoted and enacted (“Disclaimer”) and by the allegiance to Bartleby's “formula.” It is symptomatic that the work chooses to affirm the most ambiguous feature of the story.

The title of the piece, “Disclaimer”, is defined by a dictionary by two different meanings, one legal as “a denial or disavowal of legal claim, relinquishment of or formal refusal to accept an interest or estate” and also in more neutral sense as a „denial, disavowal, repudiation.“¹¹² It remains unclear whether the title disclaims the work or whether it refers to what the work does (i.e., its act of disclaiming) or both.

Apparently, we are exposed to three dimensions of the message: the form (dysfunction), the sign itself („I would prefer not to, too) and the title (disavowal, denial). If we understand it as tautological in the tradition of Kosuth's neons, the dysfunction and the Bartlebian utterance would correspond to the title and become a sign of disavowal. The work would then simultaneously denote and enact its denial of its own being. That is naturally always undermined by the work's indisputable existence in the gallery space. The various aspects of the work might, however, also communicate with each other, producing a complex open-ended dialectical interaction among the different levels, negations being undermined so as to be undermined again. We then become simultaneously exposed to a negative claim and its disavowal (“I would prefer not to, too” is disclaimed, such a disclaimer is undermined by being deliberately dysfunctional and ineffective). The work does seem to contest its own existence, but to complicate matters further, it negates that contestation and that negation itself is to be undermined. The only positive claim, the affirmation of the Bartlebian utterance, is naturally disabled as well as the allusion, which like the work itself,

¹¹² „Disclaimer,“ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. 2003.

positively exists, yet is prevented from asserting itself. On the other hand, we might also preserve the ambiguity of the Bartlebian utterance and refuse the other aspects of the work to delimit its meaning. Then everything gets even more complicated. Each negation is rendered indeterminate by the indistinctness of the utterance.¹¹³ The work presents itself either as the dynamic play of disclaimers and denials or becomes frozen by the utterance of indistinction that neither affirms nor negates. In the latter case, we come across a piece of art that seems to match Jameson's definition of a postmodern work that resists any thematical, hermeneutic interpretation, a work that arouses expectations of an event but fails to materialize it.¹¹⁴ Such apparent meaninglessness, however, Adorno maintains in relation to Beckett's *Endgame*, still remains in the realm of meaning.

In general, *Aesthetic Theory* argues that negation of meaning becomes aesthetically meaningful when it is realized in the material with which the artist works. Because such a realization requires form, authentic negation requires formal emancipation, not emancipation from form... Beckett's absurdist plays are still plays. They do not lack all meaning. They put meaning on trial.¹¹⁵

In any case, it shares in the heritage of art works that are difficult to read for as Bersani and Dutoit write in a book on Beckett, Rothko and Resnais that remains relevant for us here,

they so seldom address us; they appear to „associate“ not with the real or with their audience but only with themselves.¹¹⁶

VI.

Bartleby is utterly invisible before he comes to exist in other characters. He is materialized only via the reactions and narratives of others. Similarly, the works discussed are in themselves of spectral nature; they heavily depend on other resources to give them concrete existence. If we were

¹¹³ Both Deleuze and Derrida agree that the utterance is neither an affirmation nor a negation but, instead, it creates a zone of indistinction. See Gilles Deleuze, „Bartleby; or the Formula,“ 68-90; Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008) 76.

¹¹⁴ “Whatever a good, let alone a great, videotext might be, it will be bad or flawed whenever such interpretation proves possible, whenever the text slackly opens up such places and areas of thematization itself.” Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 92.

¹¹⁵ Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 175.

¹¹⁶ Bersani and Dutoit, *Acts of Impoverishment*, 6.

to articulate their essence, it would be a force that does not positively exist in itself but must be located via its imprints in other materials. If, according to poststructuralist theories (e.g. by Roland Barthes¹¹⁷), this is an implicit feature of any textuality, these works make it more than evident and do not entertain any illusions of originality.

What further unites all these very diverse Bartlebian works is the fact that the very allusion is translated into a certain distance these productions place between themselves (or an aspect of themselves) and their audience. In Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* Bartlebian narrative unavailability is shared by all characters of the novel whose action or language we never experience in the present tense. Bartleby's reluctance to express himself, similarly, becomes a decisive aspect to characterize all of the figures in Vila Matas' *Bartleby & Co* who decide not to express themselves by means of literature. This applies to the narrator himself and thus problematizes the text's own status; the work refuses to assume its own authority (of a literary text). Thus, similarly, Chambaud's *Disclaimer* seems to employ the ambiguity of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" to enhance the work's impotent circle of claims and disclaims, its own narcissism. These cultural events thus manipulate the story in such a way that it assists the work in its self-crippling strategies, attempts to withdraw from or complicate the process of its communication with the outside world.

It seems no accident that contemporary theory, in order to find new models for political and ethical agency that might successfully undermine or go beyond the late-capitalist system and its ideologies, also turns to Bartleby, precisely his passivity and distance. In works by Žižek or Agamben, the theoretical conclusions derived from the readings of the story are controversial and much debated, in particular, as regards the consequences for political praxis. Nevertheless, the interest in Bartleby suggests that there are signs in contemporary theory as well as cultural productions that seem to accentuate the potential and importance that lies in inaction and withdrawal in contrast to today's emphasis on values of production, activity, self-assertion.

¹¹⁷ Roland Barthes. *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

3. Žižek's Act and the Literary Example

I

The literary and artistic works explored in the previous chapter, in particular Villa Matas' *Bartleby & Co* and Chambaud's *Disclaimer*, base their own understanding of "Bartleby" on readings of the story by philosophers. Villa Matas quite explicitly alludes to Deleuze's reading of the tale when he argues that Franz Kafka was among the writers who also suffered from "Bartleby syndrome."¹¹⁸ It is no accident that Chambaud's piece is focused exclusively on Bartleby's formula. After all, it is the philosophical endeavors which focalize on this particular Bartleby's phrase making the formula the story's defining characteristic, a reference encompassing its meaning and message. It is especially true of Slavoj Žižek's reading of the tale. In fact, the philosopher cares only about the formula while the rest of the narrative deserves, on his part, no mention.

It is self-evident that literature, art and philosophy treat "Bartleby" differently than it is usual in literary criticism. These readings of "Bartleby" naturally do not conform to the common criteria of scholarly interpretation of a literary text, if only because the literary text is torn from its literary context. In case of philosophy, "Bartleby's" presence has to do with a certain function literature performs in that field. In the realm of philosophy, it is employed to work on a problem important to that respective philosophy. In the following three chapters we will see "Bartleby" to stand for a more general model in which literature serves to exemplify and dramatize central concepts in philosophy to show the latter's practical, political importance. Consequently, "Bartleby" will become our guide to examine this particular role literature plays in contemporary philosophy.

Slavoj Žižek's use of "Bartleby" is one of the most reductive, as we have mentioned. It is probably also the most political, radical and controversial one. "Bartleby" plays a specific role in Žižek's oeuvre as his (in)action comes to exemplify the controversial model of "politics of withdrawal" that is introduced as a solution to what the philosopher perceives as the current

¹¹⁸ Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartleby & Co*, trans. Jonathan Dunne. (New York: New Direction Books, 2000), 64.

political deadlock. “Bartleby” is, however, not the only literary example in Žižek’s oeuvre to perform this function. In fact, Žižek likes to turn to literary characters whenever he theorizes political agency. Along with Antigone and Sygne de Coûfontaine, the figure of Bartleby becomes one of the several key literary examples that Žižek keeps returning to.

Cultural digressions occur frequently in Žižek’s work, and some claim that the exemplary character of Žižek’s theory is its defining characteristic. Scott Stephens and Rex Butler, for instance, see in such a propensity for digressions a way in which Žižek’s writing manifests itself as “endless enquiry into its own discursive conditions.” Cultural examples, from Stephens’s and Butler’s perspective, index the fact that there is no philosophical concept that is free from its necessarily twisting enunciative conditions, i.e., its exemplification. Like the mediators in the psychoanalytical procedure of the pass, cultural examples can be said to deform Žižek’s thought system, but this is precisely where to look for the truth of this system.¹¹⁹

In particular, the foregoing must apply to the acts of the fictional characters who stage Žižek’s concept of the ethico-political act proper (the ethical and political dimensions remain inseparable in his work). Some cultural examples, allegedly, serve didactic purposes in order to illustrate abstruse theoretical concepts (e.g., the Lacanian Real), while others are explored in more detail to arrive at controversial interpretations. The fictional figures in question, however, are privileged among all others, for they articulate the ultimate wager of Žižek’s whole theoretical project—his concept of political agency—which they dramatize, translating concept into action, theory into praxis.

In his early publication *For They Know Not What They Do*, Žižek shows that exemplarity, truth and action/praxis are all closely interrelated. He targets the problem of exemplarity when drawing an analogy between hysteria and Hegel’s figures of consciousness in *The Phenomenology*

¹¹⁹ Butler and Stephens draw a parallel between Žižek’s discourse and the institution of *passe* in Lacanian psychoanalysis, by which the analysand becomes an analyst by giving an account of his analysis to a committee of analysts through two witnesses who are still in analysis. The two, moved by unconscious impulses, are expected to distort the message. Yet the decision depends precisely on whether such distortions still manage to communicate a certain truth of the analyst-to-be, in fact: “These distortions are the truth.” See Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Interrogating the Real*, by Slavoj Žižek, edited by Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2005), 3–4. Italics in the original.

of *Spirit*. These figures, writes Žižek, represent examples which “subvert the very Idea they exemplify,”¹²⁰ revealing the implicit presuppositions or unspoken impasses inherent in the idea itself. The ascetic’s asserted denial of his body, when put into practice, is nothing but a constant preoccupation with it and with the ways of mortifying it. The notion that such examples represent the (subversive, unconscious) truth of a theoretical attitude is a perspective that can also be traced in Žižek’s view of philosophy itself. From his discussion of other philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, Habermas, or Butler, it becomes clear that the truth of philosophy, for Žižek, lies in the actual praxis the particular “system” leads to; the political failures, whether collaboration with Nazism or ultimate conformity in regard to the status quo, reveal a disavowed impasse in the theoretical work. Such a political failure need not concern the thinker himself/herself (e.g., Habermas as a state philosopher, Heidegger as a Nazi sympathizer); those who follow this philosophy are also likely, as a consequence, to make serious political mistakes (e.g., Heideggerians in Communist Yugoslavia¹²¹). In other words, the truth of a philosophical notion is the political drama of those who profess it, which leads one to the conclusion that the ultimate success of philosophy is workable politics. The political motivation is also what lurks behind Žižek’s Lacanian revival of German idealism, as he himself attests in a 2007 interview with Michael Hauser:

So I think that I’m very traditional, basically, that German idealism, the metaphysics of German idealism, still offers the best conceptual tools to deal with the crisis we are approaching. Because, as Hegel knew, philosophy and crisis are always connected. All philosophy, it’s clear, Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, even Plato—you cannot imagine Plato without the political crisis of Greece. No wonder that Plato’s representative book is *The*

¹²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008), 143.

¹²¹ “When, in my youth, I was bombarded by the official Communist philosophers’ stories of Heidegger’s Nazi engagement, they left me rather cold; I was definitely more on the side of the Yugoslav Heideggerians. All of a sudden, however, I became aware of how these Yugoslav Heideggerians were doing exactly the same thing with respect to the Yugoslav ideology of self-management as Heidegger himself did with respect to Nazism: Heideggerians entertained the same ambiguously assertive relationship toward Social self-management, the official ideology of the Communist regime—in their eyes, the essence of self-management was the very essence of modern man, which is why the philosophical notion of self-management suits the ontological essence of our epoch, while the standard political ideology of the regime misses this ‘inner greatness’ of self-management . . . Heideggerians are thus eternally in search of a positive, ontic political system that would come closest to the epochal ontological truth, a strategy which inevitably leads to error (which, of course, is always acknowledged only retroactively, post factum, after the disastrous outcome of one’s engagement).” Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 13.

Republic, which, typically, although you have all of Plato's ontology there, the metaphor of the cave and so on, but nonetheless all this emerges to answer which kind of political order we need. So, that would be the point.¹²²

Earlier, in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek writes unequivocally:

While this book is philosophical in its basic tenor, it is first and foremost an engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism.¹²³

Žižek's philosophical project is therefore driven by a deeply political interest. Naturally, all this immediately poses a question about both Žižek's own political interventions and the success or failure of Žižek's politics as it emerges from his heterodox re-reading of German idealism through Lacanian psychoanalysis. The latter is registered by literary examples.

Literary characters often appear at the end of Žižek's books, precisely where abstract issues (interlaced with discussions of culture) elaborated on in the text are to be led to a desired conclusion, i.e., a proposal for alternative forms of political agency. While they embody a decisive move from abstract concepts to concrete models of behavior, they can literally be said to test Žižek's theory in actu, staging its deadlocks or implicit presuppositions, its politics, and its truth. This is also attested by the fact that they have become frequent sites of debates over Žižek's politics.

Unlike other cultural works that Žižek likes to explore in detail, in his use of literary characters as exemplary agents he does not engage in lengthy interpretation and is not actually interested in the details of the plot. In fact, the texts are usually condensed into a single, aesthetically charged gesture which is employed to animate the point of the whole theoretical project. Thus we are presented with Antigone's monstrous insistence or Sygne de Coûfontaine's repulsive tic combined with Bartleby's inert "I would prefer not to."¹²⁴ In what follows I will

¹²² Michael Hauser, "Humanism Is Not Enough: Interview with Slavoj Žižek," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/211/310>.

¹²³ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 4.

¹²⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 381; Herman Melville, Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street, in *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile, *The Piazza Tales*, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, *Uncollected Prose*, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, ed.

examine these figures as crucial points of convergence of Žižek's philosophy, politics and aesthetics. In the first part of the chapter, I will examine their peculiar role of "impossible examples" that register the failure of Žižek's attempt at prescriptive politics. Later on, I will shift my focus and examine fictional characters as specific rhetorical tools that make possible a more intimate relationship between readers and Žižek's theory, and that play a role in Žižek's attempt to unite theory and practice.

II

As Žižek's literary examples occupy a central position in the structure of his thought and are employed to cast the light on the key concepts of his ontology, i.e., the way the latter are to be put in practice, it becomes necessary to grasp the basic contours of that ontology. Therein lies the difficulty of the analysis of the critical function literary examples, such as "Bartleby," assume in philosophy: one cannot deal only with particular cases. It is necessary to study them in the context of the complicated philosophical background. The importance of the literary examples in the theoretical edifice can be appreciated only if one understands the crucial import of the concepts these examples clarify.

The political stakes of Žižek's philosophy lie in his revival of Cartesian subjectivity, namely its subversive hidden core, which was first registered and further developed by Kant (who, according to Žižek, ultimately shrank from the radical implications of his own conclusions) and later Hegel. This radical core of German idealism has been left unnoticed by post-structuralist theories that, however, claim to be the inheritors of this particular tradition.¹²⁵ The post-structuralist achievement (of, for example, Althusser or Foucault) is represented by the detailed and intricate exploration of the ways in which human subjects are always already determined by factors beyond their control (power, ideology, etc.), which offers little hope for political agency. Žižek's rise to

Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (New York: Library of America, 1984), 635–72; Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. J. E. Thomas (Clayton, DE: Prestwick House, 2005); Paul Claudel, *The Hostage*, trans. Pierre Chavannes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917).

¹²⁵ Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 65.

popularity in Western academia can also be attributed to the fact that, at least at first sight, he seems to overcome what some perceive as the political deadlocks of post-structuralism.¹²⁶ On account of his Lacanian tools, Žižek manages to extract a notion of an absolutely autonomous, if unconscious and non-substantial, subject that remains irreducible to socio-historic conditions.

From Žižek's complex discussions of subjectivity, two moments seem especially relevant for the discussion of the ethico-political act, namely, the subject as a void and the subject as a negative-contractive force, the "vanishing mediator" between nature and culture, both notions having profound political ramifications.

The implicit radicality of Descartes's inaugural attempt to think purely formal subjectivity devoid of any content apart from "I think" is taken into account, according to Žižek, by Kant's objection that the subject is not self-transparent.¹²⁷ It is the "X that thinks," the formal "unity of apperception" that itself makes experience possible and thus must be logically presupposed, but its notion can never be filled with intuited experiential reality.¹²⁸ Adrian Johnston explains: "The (presupposed) being of the Kantian noumenal subject can only ever appear, within the frame of phenomenal (self-) experience, as a void."¹²⁹ In other words, the subject, as an inaccessible locus that sustains what we perceive as reality, can be registered only indirectly, in the way the reality we encounter is never consistent, never a harmonized totality. This is, however, always obfuscated, in Lacanian terms, by unconscious fantasy on the level of an individual, or ideological fantasy on the level of a society. As Fabio Vighi explains,

¹²⁶ In their introduction to a collection of critical responses to Žižek's work, *Traversing the Fantasy*, Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher note: "Positions that wholly 'write away' the subject in the play of some other more profound ontological instance—whether arch-writing, power, or the body without organs—tend infamously to be left wondering about their own position of enunciation and to what agency they might be addressing their 'radical' appeals. By contrast, Žižek's (Kantian-Hegelian) 'critique of metaphysics' aligns itself directly and from the start with the reflexive (or 'apperceptive') potential of individuals—precisely as subjects—not only to 'stand out' from, but also to actively intervene in and change, the historical orders into which they have been 'thrown.'" Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe, "Introduction: Traversing the Fantasy," in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), xiii.

¹²⁷ See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 13.

¹²⁸ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 14.

¹²⁹ Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 62.

we are the very impossibility that we ascribe to external reality, and that [reality] we must constantly disavow or displace if we are to connect with it. The very surplus generated by our attempt to grasp the meaning of the world is both what prevents us from fully grasping it and what allows us to engage with it in its material guise.¹³⁰

Thus the subject-as-void corresponds to the basic incompleteness of reality (both epistemological and ontological); in Lacan's conceptual edifice, the barred subject is correlative to the barred Other.

Žižek draws an analogy between this Kantian transcendental subject and Lacan's subject of the empty signifier without a signified (which has been primordially repressed). The latter is distinct from ego—a sense of identity, inner richness. There is a connection, however, between the subject and the ego. The subject, as a formal structure lacking “any positive-substantial determinations,”¹³¹ underlies man's potentiality to assume an infinite number of identities, roles, and mandates, without being reducible to any of them. It manifests itself only in the form of a failure of every self, man's ultimate non-coincidence with himself. This deficiency, however, is what drives identity formation; the urge to embrace identities and roles is but a defensive strategy to avoid the abysmal negativity that disavowed truth about our being. Nothing attests to the Žižekian subject better, Adrian Johnston claims with regard to the postmodern celebration of multiple and diffused subject-positions:

[T]he more one insists upon subjectivity as a dispersed multitude of shifting and unstable identity-constructs, the more one is confronted with the necessity of positing a universal, empty, and contentless frame, a formal void, as the backdrop against which the “mad dance of identifications” takes place.¹³²

The ultimate point, however, is that the ruling social order can never capture the subject by its “ideological interpellation”; there is always a negative dimension that escapes it.

The subject is sometimes also described as a dynamic gesture, a contractive force, and a kind of madness. Descartes's withdrawal into radical doubt, Kant's transcendental imagination, and

¹³⁰ Fabio Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics: Surplus, Subtraction, Sublimation* (London: Continuum, 2010), 133.

¹³¹ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 44.

¹³² Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, 11–12.

the Hegelian “night of the world”¹³³ are coupled with the Lacanian death drive to introduce the freedom of subjectivity as “the violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself,”¹³⁴ man’s capacity to cut his ties to his immediate environment. This impulse is sometimes theorized by Žižek in terms of a disruptive withdrawal from immersion in the so-called natural cycle, man’s “denaturalization.” Already not nature, but not yet culture, this move is one of the basic dislocations in which humanity is thrown out of joint with its object, on account of which man never fits his environment, which remains in a state of radical contingency and as such open to change. The subject names an imbalance introduced in the self-sufficient functioning of the natural world, the process of satisfying one’s biological instincts. It is presented as the drive that persists beyond mere biological life, as “beyond the pleasure principle.”¹³⁵ Culture is then merely an attempt to control and discipline this excess which makes culture possible, yet in itself remains ultimately indifferent to and incompatible with its laws and its norms. It is this basic-level indifference towards social conventions and rules, as well as towards one’s self-interest, which constitutes the basic ethical dimension of the death drive, the abyss of freedom as subjectivity.

The drive then manifests itself as a “wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one’s own will, cost what it may,”¹³⁶ on account of nothing but the excess that defines the subject. Such explosive occasions, when the drive at the heart of human beings rises to the surface, correspond to moments when subjects “traverse their fundamental fantasy” insofar as they acknowledge the disavowed beliefs that tie them to a particular social organization and perceive the latter’s contingency, its very inconsistency on account of the excess (of the death-drive, of the jouissance—the pleasure in pain beyond the pleasure principle) around which the social-symbolic fabric is structured.

¹³³ “The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful.” Hegel quoted in Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 7–8, quoted in Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 29–30.

¹³⁴ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 34.

¹³⁵ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 37.

¹³⁶ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 36.

By virtue of its negative restlessness, the subject is capable of rejecting all of its symbolic mandates, of cutting itself off from the social fabric (undergoing a so-called symbolic death), and withdrawing into the abyss of autonomous subjectivity from which any reality can be radically questioned while new possibilities emerge. It is this unconscious and unruly dimension which escapes socialization that forms the basic structure of the act, the paradigm of the ethico-political agency. Such a negative cut of “wiping the slate clean,” of a violent subtraction from the socio-symbolic field, is a necessary pre-requisite for a truly new beginning (a new individual identity, a new symbolic order). The events that exemplify the act in its collective dimension are revolutions, such as the French revolution of 1789 or the Russian revolution of 1917. It is certainly peculiar, however, that individual examples of the act by far outnumber Žižek’s examples of collective revolts. Moreover, it is precisely in the case of individual examples of the act that Žižek prefers to have recourse to fiction¹³⁷ – films, opera and literature. The question is then the following: Why does the philosopher prefer fictional accounts to the historical ones?¹³⁸

III

Žižek’s literary examples of the act are often adapted from Lacan’s commentaries on literary texts as they appear in the latter’s seminars *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and *Transference*. Oedipus Colonus, Antigone, and Sygne de Coûfontaine are figures driven precisely by the excessive drive,

¹³⁷ The exceptions include Žižek’s account of the case of the American teacher Mary Kay Letourneau, who had a love affair with her underage student. See Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 382–88.

¹³⁸ One possible answer as to why Žižek turns to gestures by literary heroes when theorizing the act can be found within certain strands of literary theory that find the specificity of literature precisely in its staging of agency. Theorists such as Steven Knapp or Martha Nussbaum believe that literature is “a practice that instructs in exercise of agency.” Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 31. For Knapp this is related to the specific nature of literature as defined by the formalists – it being a “concrete universal,” at once a particular and universal experience. It is this oscillation between particular and universal that for him defines agency as such: “For part of what being an agent is (always) like, apparently, is being caught up in an irreducible oscillation between typicality and particularity: between (on one side) the forms of action that an agent must understand in order to make sense of herself as the possible performer of certain actions, and (on the other side) the concrete history without which the agent could not distinguish herself from those who might, otherwise, just as well replace her. And this, once again, resembles the structure of mutual implication that characterizes the relation between the typicality of literary object-types and the particularity of the complex scenarios in which the literary work inserts them.” Literature thus replicates the dynamics of human agency where what is at stake are typical roles that literature particularizes suggesting they can be realized in practice and the reader can be identified with them. Steven Knapp, *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-formalism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993), 139. What is at stake is then consciousness of possibilities and choices that wouldn’t otherwise be so evident. Despite the very different theoretical and political interests, this is precisely what Žižek is concerned with.

“unyielding right to the end, demanding everything, giving up nothing, absolutely unreconciled.”¹³⁹

As Žižek himself comments:

In all his [Lacan’s] great literary interpretations, from Oedipus and Antigone through Sade’s Juliette to Claudel’s Hostage, he is in search of a point at which we enter the dimension of the “inhuman,” a point at which “humanity” disintegrates so that all that remains is a pure subject. Sophocles’s Antigone, Sade’s Juliette, Claudel’s Sygne—they are all figures of such an “inhuman” subject.¹⁴⁰

I wish to focus on Antigone, in particular, the comprehensive exegesis of which appears at the end of Lacan’s *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Antigone’s act is one of the most frequently cited examples in Žižek’s work, as well as a frequent target of criticism that aims at Žižek’s political (mis)appropriation of Lacanian theories.¹⁴¹ One of the reasons for the controversial nature of Žižek’s use of the text, however, lies in the ambiguous function of Antigone’s agency in Lacan’s commentary. More, as will become evident in due course, Antigone’s uncertain and puzzling status is one that defines the function of the literary example in philosophy we are dealing with in this thesis.

In Lacan’s *Ethics* Antigone’s suicidal insistence on the burial of her brother despite Creon’s interdiction exemplifies the ultimately transgressive and destructive nature of desire (the death drive) and its incompatibility with any established social values and norms. At the same time, through Antigone, Lacan focuses on the cathartic function of tragedy. Like psychoanalysis, tragedy confronts us with the true nature of desire and it does so by aesthetic means, via the hero’s sublimity and grandeur. The question remains of whether the hero also represents exemplary ethical behavior. Lacan’s text seems to vacillate between descriptive and prescriptive levels, while both positions can be argued, a fact which divides Lacanians into two camps. On the one hand, Lacan explicitly

¹³⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, vol. 7 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 310.

¹⁴⁰ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 42.

¹⁴¹ See, for example, Yannis Stavrakakis, “The Lure of Antigone: Aporias of an Ethics of the Political,” in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 171–82, or Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 78.

discusses the limits of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the seminar.¹⁴² Psychoanalysis, like tragedy, guides us toward an existential experience but then leaves us at the threshold to find our own measure, our own direction in between destructive, transgressive desire and the social goods. As Marc De Kesel notes, we are no heroes and we always compromise our desire in one way or another.¹⁴³ On the other hand, we are presented with a tragic heroine who is explicitly praised and admired in the text for having remained true to her desire. Importantly, towards the end of the seminar, Lacan famously articulates that “the only thing one can be guilty of is to have given ground from one’s desire,” which is likely to be understood as commanding that no ground be given at all.¹⁴⁴

While acknowledging the validity of interpretation in favor of the descriptive, Žižek seems to suspect in that reading a tendency to confine Antigone’s radicalism exclusively to the realm of aesthetics and treat “aesthetic contemplation of a radical ethical stance . . . as a supplement to our ‘real life’ compromising attitude of ‘following the crowd,’”¹⁴⁵ a stance which, according to Žižek, cannot be claimed as Lacanian. Žižek, conversely, seems to consider Antigone as more than

¹⁴² “On the other hand, I will straight away point out to those who might be inclined to forget it, or who might think that I am following in this direction only by referring to the moral imperative in our experience—I will point out that moral action poses problems for us precisely to the extent that if analysis prepares us for it, it also in the end leaves us standing at the door.” Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 21. In a similar vein Lacan writes: “psychoanalysis can accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the ‘Thou art that,’ wherein is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins.” Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I,” trans. Jean Roussel, in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 99.

¹⁴³ See Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan’s Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 264.

¹⁴⁴ Lorenzo Chiesa further argues that Antigone must be acknowledged as an ethical model since it follows from Lacan’s statements that her actions lie at the heart of psychoanalysis: “I believe that Antigone as an image of lack is also inevitably understood by Lacan as a model for the ethics of psychoanalysis as articulated in Seminar VII. This can be easily demonstrated by means of a simple syllogism. We are told that Antigone represents ‘the essence of tragedy’; we are also told that ‘tragedy is at the root of our [psychoanalytic] experience,’ and hence (the suicidal nature of) Antigone’s act is at the root of Lacanian psychoanalysis. An aesthetic ethics cannot be reduced to an aesthetics: the centrality of Antigone’s image can be extracted only from Antigone’s own act.” Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 177. However, far from suggesting that Lacan praises a suicidal action, Chiesa argues that Antigone presents us with a deadlock in Lacan’s edifice that can be satisfactorily resolved only from the standpoint of Lacan’s later writings.

¹⁴⁵ “It is possible to read Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone asserting that Antigone is not a model to be followed, but just a fascinating image, an aesthetic appearance: Antigone’s fascinating beauty explodes when she is elevated into the position of the living dead on account of her not compromising her unconditional desire. If, however, this implies that in ‘real’ life we should follow the ‘safe’ path of remaining within the symbolic coordinates and allowing the radical stance of ‘going to the end’ only in the guise of aesthetic image, does this not reduce art to the aesthetic contemplation of a radical ethical stance, as a supplement to our ‘real life’ compromising attitude of ‘following the crowd’? If there is anything foreign to Lacan, it is such a stance.” Slavoj Žižek, “Concesso non Dato,” in *Traversing the Fantasy: Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, and Matthew Sharpe (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 246.

relevant to our political or ethical behavior and approaches her act as a paradigm of the ethical-political act proper. Yet, as we shall see, his actual treatment of this fictional example emerges in a similarly equivocal manner. As in Lacan's interpretive case of her, in Žižek's hands Antigone's act oscillates between exemplarity and the merely revelatory. Moreover, this can be said of all the other literary figures that clarify his concept of the radical act. On the one hand, the literary example serves as a model of ethical and political agency to be followed, on the other hand, it is presented as a cathartic, transformational aesthetic experience with real effects that cannot be predicted in advance.

IV

In one of his encounters with the theory of Judith Butler,¹⁴⁶ Žižek has recourse to a reading of Antigone precisely as he ponders the possibility of a genuinely subversive and autonomous action. As both Butler and Žižek agree, we are unconsciously (phantasmatically) invested in the specific symbolic and social organization that we are born into and that gives us identity. The problem is then how it is at all possible to undermine or displace such an organization. In Butler's view (as paraphrased by Žižek), the Lacanian (forced) choice remains confined either to fundamental alienation in the symbolic order or to the transgression of that order at the price of psychosis. Any other resistance remains "a false transgression" and ultimately serves to maintain and further reproduce the law. The Žižek vs. Butler debate, however, asserts another option: "the effective symbolic rearticulation via the intervention of the real of an act."¹⁴⁷ The act constitutes a violent withdrawal from any symbolic identifications with their concomitant unconscious (phantasmatic) supports. The act is at the same time performative, it is a negative intrusion which, Žižek claims, at once transforms the socio-symbolic coordinates.

Enter Antigone. Via her defiance of Creon's order and her stubborn insistence on the burial of her brother, as Žižek claims, Antigone manifests her disregard of the "big Other," i.e., the whole

¹⁴⁶ See Slavoj Žižek, "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification," *Umbr(a)*, no. 1 (1998): 3–17.

¹⁴⁷ Žižek, "From 'Passionate Attachments' to Dis-Identification," 5.

normative system that regulates inter-subjective relations in a community. She not only puts at stake her entire social identity, but also sacrifices everything that ties her to the community, even perhaps all that is dear to her (her libidinal attachment to her sister and her potential marital happiness with Haemon) for the sake of a cause that matters to her more than life itself. Both Lacan and Žižek thus locate her in the domain “between two deaths,” beyond the adhesion to biological life, in the sphere of the death drive. Let us proceed to how this actually affects or transforms the very community.

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Žižek emphasizes that, through the way in which Antigone’s demand defies social reality (the big Other), she does something deemed impossible within the coordinates of the life of the polis. Antigone creates a new horizon of possibilities and, as a result, changes the contours of that reality itself; what is considered good and not good, possible or impossible. Antigone’s stubborn insistence determines afresh what is considered as the sovereign good in that particular social milieu.¹⁴⁸

Žižek further focuses on Antigone as the figure of the Other qua real, as the inhuman partner. Antigone relates to her cause directly; her demand is not communicated through the symbolic order and that is why it emerges as monstrous. While Žižek differentiates between the imaginary Other, with whom one engages in mirror-like relations (of competition, of mutual recognition, etc.), and of the symbolic Other (the explicit or implicit social rules and codes), Antigone, as the agent of the act, represents the real Other, “the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic order, is possible.”¹⁴⁹ As the embodiment of inhuman excess, the abyss of subjectivity, which usually remains hidden behind symbolic and imaginary shields, she is frightening. This inhuman aspect is translated into aesthetic terms, into the sublime monstrosity of Antigone that is later adopted by other writers for other literary characters, such as Sethe from Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) or Euripides’ Medea, both of whom kill their own children. Paul Claudel’s Sygne de Coûfontaine commits suicide by intercepting a bullet meant for her husband, whom she despises and hates. For Žižek, her act lacks any of the ancient sublimity or

¹⁴⁸ See Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 168, 172.

¹⁴⁹ Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 163.

grandeur and, being modern, remains merely repellent. There is, however, a crucial problem that pertains to Žižek's understanding of an authentic ethical and political act. Such radical acts do not necessarily have to change anything and may very well end up as being merely suicidal. For it seems evident that the extent of such transformative effects of the act depend utterly on the particular position of the agent(s) in a society.

The crucial point, moreover, arrives when we learn that while acts emerge as traumatic encounters for others, they also do so for the agents themselves. The agent remains a stranger to his own act, which becomes difficult to subjectify, to assume as one's own, for the act is something external, radically contingent or even psychotic.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, we do not commit such acts, they occur to us, and we must come to terms with them, concludes Žižek. Beyond any strategic-pragmatic calculation, they are acts of absolute freedom that we perform blindly, in utter passivity, "as an automaton, without reflection."¹⁵¹ Naturally, such coincidence of freedom and necessity fatally complicates Žižek's implicit invitation to follow Antigone's example, as well as any possible ethical-political program one might derive from Žižek's theory of agency.

V

Not surprisingly, Žižek has faced a lot of criticism precisely on account of the act he focuses on, namely its excessively violent nature,¹⁵² "its suicidal heroic ethics."¹⁵³ The act, moreover, seems to dwell far beyond any everyday, necessarily pragmatic, politics and thus poses the danger of introducing an excuse precisely for what Žižek otherwise relentlessly criticizes: a life of political quietism, redeemed in advance by the comfortable waiting for a miraculous act. As if to respond to this criticism or eager to intervene in the debate on the "what should be done" question, at the end of *The Parallax View* Žižek proposes an alternative form of subversive agency. In the last chapter, Žižek launches a fierce critique of a form of imaginary resistance which, in the final instance,

¹⁵⁰ A psychotic is someone who can project his own private social reality and ignore the dependence of the Other. Even though Žižek differentiates between the act and the psychotic passage à l'acte, uncannily, they seem to overlap. See Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 84.

¹⁵¹ Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, 162.

¹⁵² See, e.g., Simon Critchley, "Violent Thoughts about Slavoj Zizek," *Naked Punch*, supplement, 11 (2008): 3–6.

¹⁵³ Stavrakakis, "The Lure of Antigone," 173.

remains dependent on the law and order it rebels against. The “rumspringa resistance,” a representative of which Žižek perceives in Simon Critchley, shrinks from actually trying to take over the situation—since, above all, it enjoys its own dissident status.¹⁵⁴ In contrast to this resistance, Žižek proposes a politics of withdrawal. While we cannot plan the act, what we can do is to eschew activity. For where there is no activity, something else becomes evident, i.e., the very space where that activity is taking place, its symbolic coordinates, the socio-political organization in its violence and its radical contingency.

“Bartleby” in Žižek’s oeuvre comes to exemplify precisely this kind of subtractive politics. Žižek is by no means interested in the complicated structure of the narrative. He exclusively focuses on Bartleby’s repeated utterance in the form of “I would prefer not to.” This formula is taken out of its literary habitat, simply inserted into a contemporary political context, and explained via Žižek’s psychoanalytical theoretical framework.

We can imagine the varieties of such a gesture in today’s public space: not only the obvious “There are great chances of a new career here! Join us!”—“I would prefer not to”; but also “Discover the depths of your true self, find inner peace!”—“I would prefer not to”; or “Are you aware how our environment is endangered? Do something for ecology!”—“I would prefer not to”; or “What about all the racial and sexual injustices that we witness all around us? Isn’t it time to do more?”—“I would prefer not to.” This is the gesture of subtraction at its purest . . .¹⁵⁵

It is clear that Žižek does not read the utterance as radically indeterminate (as Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze do), but rather as a statement of refusal, a sign of withdrawal. Not the negation of a predicate, for Žižek it becomes an affirmation of a non-predicate (after Kant’s negative judgment). Bartleby does not refuse to do something but he wants *not to do it*. For Žižek this slight shift marks the difference between transgression that feeds on what it opposes and a gesture which, as an active

¹⁵⁴ “[I]s not Critchley’s position one of relying on the fact that someone else will take on the task of running the state machinery, enabling us to engage in critical distance toward the state?” Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 333. Italics in the original.

¹⁵⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 382

preference for the negative, remains independent of the dominant ideologies and thus moves beyond the fatal embrace of hegemony and of its negation. At one point we are told that Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" has the structure of a Lacanian *Versagung*: a rejection of the symbolic order as such, a purely formal rejection without any content, which cannot be integrated into the realm of meaning. Like the act, this enigmatic statement remains incomprehensible from the point of view of the order in which it intervenes. In the same book Žižek turns to the character of Sygne de Coûfontaine, and to the subject of the death drive, to elaborate on the *Versagung* structure. The void of both Sygne's and Bartleby's refusal repeats and enacts the radical negativity of subjectivity, the Real over which words stumble. Both are driven by an excess that cannot be grasped or represented by their respective social milieux.

In a sense, "Bartleby" can be read as a culmination of Žižek's efforts to translate his complicated metaphysics into concrete models of human agency. At first sight, what the character of Bartleby is taken to exemplify appears almost as a prescription. A refusal to undertake any activity that only helps the deleterious system to maintain itself can quite easily be translated into a conscious step. However, this aspect of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" uneasily combines precisely with the act of *Versagung* as an expression of the unconscious death drive, the transcendental point of Žižek's materialism. Problematically for Žižek's theory, there is a clear gap between the two. Fabio Vighi's question is precisely to the point:

Should we think of subtraction as a goal to be actively pursued, or as an event that takes place irrespective of our conscious intervention?¹⁵⁶

And he further points to the danger that

I might be convinced that I "subtract" for all the right social and political reasons, while unconsciously I fetishize my disengagement through a range of disavowed modalities of enjoyment.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics*, 137.

¹⁵⁷ Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics*, 136. Interestingly, Fabio Vighi tries to resolve this deadlock of Žižekian politics by suggesting that many people do not even need to subtract from the present order as they are already disconnected from it. He points to the dispossessed masses of people, inhabitants of slums, refugees, etc. The point would then be to unite/identify with them. See Vighi, *On Žižek's Dialectics*, 21, 137.

The withdrawal always risks being another form of false resistance. As Vighi argues later on, our conscious agency is unlikely to become a truly subversive political intervention unless driven by an unconscious drive; our unconscious must then be piloted by a political project, otherwise it is not likely to achieve much. Even though Bartleby could be perceived as an attempt to connect the two aspects (the pragmatic and the unconscious), his renowned statement and withdrawal in Žižek's reading fail to do so, for Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" remains split from inside.

Matthew Sharpe sees the failure of Žižek's theory to link the conscious-pragmatic in its Kantian strategy. In his opinion, Žižek moves from phenomena back to their transcendental conditions of possibility; however,

[t]o abstract from this realm in order to disclose the semantic, historical or ultra-transcendental conditions of its possibility (or of the language that political agents use to frame their understandings) means that the employee of this philosophical mode of argumentation can say nothing directly concerning the actuality of this realm, nor concerning the norms, ideals or projects which might inform political praxis within it. In his inimitable fashion, Žižek only brings this "abyss of essence" between the ontic and ontological, or empirical and transcendental realms to a hypostasized head, when he openly argues that from the perspective of ordinary political life, the mode of action authentically true to the subject's terrorizing death drive must appear as diabolically evil.¹⁵⁸

Further than this, the death drive should be not only "diabolically evil" but even monstrous or abhorrent, as Žižek's description of the heroes' acts suggests. When translated into everyday reality, Žižek's metaphysics remains and must remain repulsive, if not incoherent. Literary fiction then enacts the incompatibility of the two levels—of the Real and the real, the gap between Žižekian transcendental truth and politics—through the fictionality of the example and its extreme aesthetics.

VI

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Sharpe, "'Critchley is Žižek': In Defence of Critical Political Philosophy," *Critical Horizons* 10, no. 2 (2009): 194.

Let us first address the specifically exaggerated aesthetics that surround the act. Adrian Johnston sees in Žižek's inclination to employ excessive adjectives (repelling, horrific, etc.) a more general phenomenon of the subject's anxiety over jouissance and the drives that pose a threat to its well-being. Such exaggerated aesthetic designators merely register the tension and conflict between the subject's striving for balance and the drives—their incompatibility with our well-being, with the pleasure and reality principles.¹⁵⁹ We are confronted with the deeds of Antigone, Bartleby and Sygne, who are presented to us as the true picture of who we are. At the same time, they are described as threateningly inhuman (repulsive, monstrous, inert, etc.) and thus impossible to identify with. In this way, however, we perceive the disturbing power, uncontrollable nature, and externalness of the unconscious drive.

Once the drives distort the fragile balance of the subject, the following occurs, as Žižek describes it:

The result of experiencing and/or witnessing some excessively cruel (or otherwise libidinally invested) event, from intense sexual activity to physical torture, is that, when, afterwards, we return to our 'normal' reality, *we cannot conceive of both domains as belonging to the same reality*. The reimmersion in 'ordinary' reality renders the traumatic memory of the horror somewhat hallucinatory, derealising it. This is what Lacan is aiming at in his distinction between reality and the Real: we cannot ever acquire a complete, all-encompassing, sense of reality—some part of it must be affected by the 'loss of reality', deprived of the character of 'true reality', and this fictionalised element is precisely the traumatic Real.¹⁶⁰

Precisely this logic of the Real of the drive as incompatible with "reality" can be perceived in Žižek's depiction of the act via fictional heroes/heroines. The act, as a traumatic intrusion into ordinary reality, is grasped through that reality in the form of fiction; it is thus that its irreducibility to that reality is felt and experienced. In a certain sense, the truth of the Žižekian act could not be

¹⁵⁹ Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, 59.

¹⁶⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Kiesłowski and the Future* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 66. Italics in the original.

conveyed otherwise. In *The Fright of Real Tears*, when discussing the decision of Krzysztof Kieślowski, the Polish filmmaker, to abandon documentaries for feature films, Žižek claims that it is only through the distance guaranteed by fiction, the awareness that what is at stake is a false image (e.g., an actress playing her role), that one can express or feel the trauma of the Real—the Real of subjective experience.¹⁶¹ Otherwise it is simply rejected as obtrusive and simply too horrid. The only possible representation of the Real and also of the agency of the drive requires the suspension or distancing of the symbolic network through fiction. Thus, we have arrived at the explanation of Žižek’s peculiar turn to fiction when elaborating on the act. The Real that is crucial to Žižek’s understanding of the act can thus only be transmitted by the fictionality of the (literary) example.

VII

When discussing Žižek’s failure to be prescriptive, Jodi Dean suggests that Žižek occupies the position of an analyst who frustrates the perception of himself as “the subject supposed to know” and intentionally upsets the demand to tell us what to do. Like the analyst, Žižek merely creates the occasion so that we can figure it out for ourselves. The criticism of Žižek for his lack of concrete political vision is, according to Dean, more suggestive of the critics’ unwillingness to tackle the problem themselves.¹⁶² Indeed, in the documentary film *Žižek!*, Žižek appears to be mindful about the transferential relationship he happens to be in with regard to his audience. He takes into account the fact that many look up to him as to “the bright intellectual” with all the answers. He confirms Dean’s hypothesis when he explicitly speaks of trying to place himself in the analyst’s position and to purposely disappoint the demands others address to him in order to force his interrogators to face the very problem of their demand.¹⁶³ Elsewhere he insists that philosophers in general, when

¹⁶¹ See Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 30.

¹⁶² See Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xix–xx.

¹⁶³ See Žižek in Astra Taylor, dir., *Žižek!* (Zeitgeist Films, 2005).

expected to intervene in the public space, should act toward their audience in a manner not unlike that of analysts towards their patients.¹⁶⁴

Levi Bryant takes Jodi Dean's point even further when he suggests that we should treat Žižek's texts primarily as psychoanalytic interventions. When trying to understand Žižek's political program, rather than what Žižek says, we ought to consider what he does. Žižek's theses, like the Lacanian psychoanalyst's interpretations, regardless of whether they are accurate or not, themselves reconfigure the framework of the situations into which they intervene.¹⁶⁵ This approach is also validated to an extent by Žižek himself when he claims that the task of philosophy is, above all, to change the basic concepts of the debate.¹⁶⁶

Bryant's and Dean's approach to Žižek's politics is thus legitimate. Yet it is one which risks disclaiming the clearly discernible intention on Žižek's part to articulate a prescriptive model of political behavior. As the case of *Bartleby* implies, Žižek does attempt to propose practical solutions and answers and is apparently interested in having us converted to his vision of what should be done at the moment, hardly a classically conceived psychoanalytic interest. In agreement with Matthew Sharpe, Žižek's confusing prescriptions are much more a matter of the gap between his transcendental philosophy and everyday politics than a question of Žižek's intentional efforts to frustrate his readers' demands. However, this is not to diminish the interventional or psychoanalytical aspects of Žižek's texts as described above; rather, one simply should not ignore the fact that in the light of his own thesis, presented at the beginning of this essay, Žižek's project is a fiasco. His theory fails at the prescriptive level. One ought not to reject him for that reason (as Ernesto Laclau or Simon Critchley do¹⁶⁷) and thus remain blind to the more indirect effect of Žižek's work, but all the same one should not disavow the failure.

¹⁶⁴ Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. Peter Engelmann, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 50.

¹⁶⁵ See Levi R. Bryant, "Symptomal Knots and Evental Ruptures: Žižek, Badiou, and Discerning the Indiscernible," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/30/89>.

¹⁶⁶ See Badiou and Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 51.

¹⁶⁷ See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 237; Simon Critchley, "Foreword: Why Žižek Must Be Defended," in *The Truth of Žižek*, ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007), xiv.

Literary characters, then, reflect both aspects: they are the loci of the conflict between Žižek's philosophy and Žižek's politics but their function can also be described in terms of the performative and interventional nature of his theory. For, besides being exemplary if impossible agents, fictional characters represent a way in which it is possible to decisively intervene in the reader's world.

VIII

As Bryant reminds us, Žižek's principal method, as announced by the latter in the foreword to *The Parallax View*, is that of short-circuiting levels that are usually kept apart; for instance, a reading of a hegemonic subject matter through the lenses of a marginal or excluded element (e.g., reading Lacan through popular culture, or Heidegger through pornography, etc.). By combining what is considered mutually incompatible, Bryant argues, Žižek dissolves fixed libidinal attachments. As a consequence, possibilities not previously discernible in the configuration emerge and must be reacted to by other elements.

Precisely such "impossible" short-circuiting is what is at stake in Žižek's employment of fictional agents. As we have said, everyday political reality and the theory of the act as exemplified by fiction remain incompatible. However, the strategic confrontation of mutually untranslatable perspectives is precisely what defines the Žižekian parallax gap, a juxtaposition of two incompatible sides of a phenomenon which "can be grasped only in a kind of parallax view, constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis and mediation is possible."¹⁶⁸ Therefore, the importance of the juxtaposition of social reality with its recognized models of political agency, on the one hand, and fictional characters, on the other, lie not only in the reader's changed view of forms of political agency but the transformed status of agency as such: acting itself becomes something different. This shift of the subjective position, as well as the status of agency, emerge as a consequence of oscillating between recognized forms of agency and the act with its fictional "impossible" examples.

¹⁶⁸ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 4.

Looking at political reality through fiction distances readers from that reality, and contests the naturalness of its implicit dogmas. The point is to launch an annihilatory attack on contemporary cynicism and a loss of faith in grand political causes as against the heroic background of ancient and modern literary texts and films. In addition to that, Žižek's admiration for the radical deeds of the heroes and heroines indirectly invites us to grasp their greatness negatively, through the recognition of our own limitations (i.e., our own cynicism, our own strategic compromises, etc.). As Žižek writes about film, its ultimate achievement as a cultural form

is not to recreate reality within the narrative fiction, to seduce us into (mis)taking a fiction for reality, but, on the contrary, to make us discern the fictional aspect of reality itself, to experience reality itself as a fiction.¹⁶⁹

By looking awry at social reality through fiction—e.g., through Bartleby's gesture of non-preference or via Antigone's insistence—we might experience our own "reality" as contingent, and its accepted ways as arbitrary. What is at stake, in other words, is "traversing the fantasy" which sustains our social organization as the only legitimate one, and necessary.

In his recent volume *Living in the End Times* Žižek introduces a slightly different version of the thesis from the one I cited at the beginning of this essay. When discussing the overall strategy of the book, he draws an analogy between Lacan's performative concept of interpretation "Interpretation is not tested by a truth that would decide by yes or no, it unleashes truth as such. It is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed" and Marx's Thesis XI: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."¹⁷⁰ Both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist theory exemplify the "dialectical unity of theory and practice" insofar as the value of theory lies in the transformative effects it produces in its recipients. Here what is important is apparently not so much a coherent articulation of a viable political project, but rather the very interaction between a basic theoretical thesis and its audience. The ultimate goal becomes an intervention that is effective to such an extent that it manages to interfere in the unconscious of the

¹⁶⁹ Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 77.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), xiii.

individual and, by extension, even the transindividual, which itself jump-kicks social transformation. If otherwise, we are left with nothing but a fetishistic split—"I know very well . . . but nevertheless"—illustrated by Žižek's frequently repeated joke about the ignorance of chickens.¹⁷¹ In such a case, however, it is in the actual dialogue between the reader and the theory that the stakes lie—the reason for the most sophisticated strategic-rhetorical approach, the important part of which is the fictional characters. For, according to Žižek, truly great art confronts us with the fundamental fantasies of both our personal and social realities, inviting us to traverse them. It seems no coincidence that Žižek attributes to fiction a psychoanalytical power precisely when he writes that "fiction intrudes into and hurts dreams themselves, secret fantasies that form the unavowed kernel of our lives."¹⁷²

It might be possible to relate the peculiar role of the fictional characters to Žižek's repeated suggestions related to the emancipatory power of art,¹⁷³ exemplified in his writing almost exclusively by opera. Art, it seems, entertains precisely the power to speak to the very negative restlessness hidden in human beings; the drive as the excessive yearning for what radically differs from whatever is, which therefore cannot be assigned any content, and of which Simone Weil writes:

And what is this good? I have no idea— . . . It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods.¹⁷⁴

Towards the end of *The Fragile Absolute* Žižek describes a scene from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (dir. Frank Darabont, 1994), where a convict talks about the emancipatory effect of Mozart's opera on the prisoners. As Žižek describes it,

¹⁷¹ "For decades, a classic joke has been circulating among Lacanians to exemplify the key role of the Other's knowledge: a man who believes himself to be a grain of seed is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a grain of seed but a man; however, when he is cured (convinced that he is not a grain of seed but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid [it] will eat him. 'My dear fellow,' says the doctor, 'you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man.' 'Of course I know,' replies the patient, 'but does the chicken?'" Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 251.

¹⁷² Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 77.

¹⁷³ See, for example, Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 272, or Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute; or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 159–60.

¹⁷⁴ Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 316, quoted in Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 80.

In hearing this aria from Figaro, the prisoners have seen a ghost—neither the resuscitated obscene ghost of the past, nor the spectral ghost of the capitalist present, but the brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness to which every authentic revolutionary stance should cling.¹⁷⁵

At work are the sites of Utopian Otherness, where the abyss of freedom at the core of human being finds its articulation. And it is this negative restlessness that Žižek is trying to bring alive in his audience through his appropriation of Antigone, Sygne, or Bartleby.

IX

As we have seen, the literary example in Žižek's philosophy offers a fruitful perspective in which it is possible to assess the political project proposed by the Slovenian theorist. When examined from such a viewpoint, Žižek's project is split between the prescriptive level on the one hand, and the experiential and performative dimension on the other. Due to the unavoidable conflict between the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the act, as a model of ethical and political agency it ends up being confusing and incomprehensible. Once the act is presented as an event that takes place irrespective of our conscious decision, as a goal to actively strive for, it becomes problematic. In particular, if one wishes to pursue Žižek's Bartlebyesque politics, there is always the risk that one unconsciously, perversely enjoys one's passivity despite the conscious determination to act radically.

At first sight, Žižek's use of literary examples as a political intervention seems more successful considering the influence of Žižek in the public sphere, and the amount of paper that leading political theorists have dedicated to discussing Žižek's concept of the act. Given the confusing nature of the model of ethical and political agency Žižek proposes, however, his recourse to fiction that in itself is supposed to bring about its emancipatory effect appears doubtful as well. It may as well be accused of offering his readers "aesthetic contemplation of a radical ethical stance" that merely substitutes for and legitimizes one's quite unheroic and conformist daily life. In the end,

¹⁷⁵ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 159–60.

Žižek can provide no guarantee that what he offers is no more than an instance of false resistance, which he otherwise so fervently opposes.

We should, in any case, register the tension between the prescriptive level and the experiential and performative element of the literary example in Žižek's philosophy as its peculiar, and perhaps defining, characteristic. The particular dilemma between aesthetics and politics will reemerge and characterize both Agamben's and Deleuze's treatment of literature as manifested in their readings of "Bartleby".

4. Agamben's Literary Paradigm

I

In the introduction of one of her essays, Nina Power has noticed that the discussion of social resistance in political theory has recently turned to solitary literary figures who are “reduced to their ability to merely resist or to refuse in the last resort.”¹⁷⁶ The model thinker of this anti-heroic tendency is the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who frequently employs literary examples to hint at the proper ethical-political behavior. Agamben's politics, like the politics of other notables such as Toni Negri, Gilles Deleuze, or Slavoj Žižek, is a politics conceived “as the practice of a philosophical principle and philosophy as the completion of politics.”¹⁷⁷ Literary examples serve to bridge the two disciplines and introduce an unexpected political model based on a reinterpretation of ontological problems. The following text examines Agamben's use of literary examples to articulate the meaning of ethical and political life. Why and how does the Italian philosopher use literature as exemplary of authentic ethics and politics? What does literature and politics gain and lose by his philosophical treatment?

II

In his book *The Literary Agamben*, William Watkin points out that almost a third of Giorgio Agamben's oeuvre centres on questions of art and literature and argues that these are intimately interrelated with his metaphysical and political concerns. According to Watkin, without an understanding of Agamben's approach to literature, one cannot truly grasp his philosophico-political project.¹⁷⁸ One of the reasons is that the central theses of his works dealing with political and metaphysical issues usually rest on a close reading of or allusions to literary texts.

¹⁷⁶ Nina Power, „Potentiality or Capacity? - Agamben's Missing Subjects,“ *Theory & Event*, no. 1 (2010), accessed December 14, 2016, https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v013/13.1-.power.html.

¹⁷⁷ Katja Diefenbach, “Im/potential Politics. Political Ontologies in Negri, Agamben and Deleuze,” trans. Emiliano Battista, in *Becoming-major, Becoming-minor*, ed. Vanessa Brito and Emiliano Battista (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2011), 211.

¹⁷⁸ William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben. The Adventure in Logopoiesis* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 2-4.

Watkin argues that literature plays a decisive role in Agamben's attempt to overcome the deadlocks of metaphysics and contemporary nihilism.¹⁷⁹ Agamben is interested in literature because it provides a unique access to an experience of language that defines and founds thought and being as such, having, therefore, fundamental (political) repercussions. By language, however, Agamben means something very peculiar and specific. Influenced by the philosophy of Walter Benjamin and the theories of the French linguist Émile Benveniste, Agamben understands languages in its capability to mediate a message, in its communicability as such. This is an ontologically prior limit experience of the presence of language that does not have any specific content, does not mediate things through meanings but communicates itself only. What founds our existence in language is a fundamental experience of the hollow linguistic exteriority, our potentiality to use language.

Agamben claims that the understanding of language by modern philosophy is problematic for the latter presupposes the former and fails to find a way to let language speak for itself – it always forces it to speak about something. Literature, on the other hand, offers an experience of the pure mediating capability of language and preserves the authentic relationship towards it, a relationship that has been forgotten by philosophy and politics. While philosophy thinks language but cannot possess it, literature (poetry in particular) experiences and enjoys language but cannot think it. Both therefore suffer from nihilism and negativism. The solution – the working through this ancient scission - according to Agamben and Watkin, rests somewhere *in between* literature and philosophy. It does not belong to either nor does it lie in some ideal unity. It is rather located in a space *in between*, in a strained harmony, stilled dialectics – logopoiesis.¹⁸⁰

Watkin first introduces logopoiesis by means of Agamben's figures-gestures which provide us with the space of positively charged silence precisely in between philosophy and literature. Such gestures do not say anything but reveal the being-in-language of humans, their

¹⁷⁹ Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 174.

¹⁸⁰ Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 47, 133.

capacity to communicate.¹⁸¹ An example of such a gestic space is a tablet belonging to the philosopher Damascius. The old sage is trying to think how it is possible to articulate the beginning of thought until he understands that his ample treatise can be completed only when he stops writing altogether, and so he breaks his tablet.¹⁸² The enigmatic behavior of Melville's Bartleby who refuses to control and copy legal documents and who responds to most objections and orders "that he would prefer not to" is another case in point.

According to Watkin, however, these figures simply exemplify Agamben's crucial concerns, they thus constitute merely the weakest form of logopoiesis.¹⁸³ For Watkin is more interested in how in Agamben's texts post metaphysical thought follows the tautological, circular, recursive-projective rhythm of poetry. The seeds of such logopoiesis are undoubtedly discernible in Agamben's way of thinking and writing – a paradoxical prose that tends not to explain itself. When one examines Agamben's persistent use of individual literary works in his texts, one finds it is either illustrative or paradigmatic. In the subsequent "more political" books such as *The Coming Community*, literary paradigms appear when an alternative politics/ethics is at stake. Literary protagonists – precisely the anti-heroes of Kafka's, Melville's or Walser's texts are introduced as paradigmatic of Agamben's ethical life, life that resists or evades the apparatuses of power. It is to them I would like to turn my attention.

III

The reason why Agamben chooses these indeterminate figures becomes clearer once we understand that man, for Agamben, is a being without content, whose principal feature is the possibility of being (and speaking). For Agamben ethics and politics are only possible since "there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize."¹⁸⁴ It is precisely against the backdrop of humankind's essential vacancy that

¹⁸¹ Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 60.

¹⁸² Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 61-62.

¹⁸³ Watkin, *The Literary Agamben*, 124.

¹⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 42.

ethics must be theorized and any notion of community must be discussed. It might seem now that the shapeless modernist figures merely illustrate Agamben's fundamental ideas on human existence, but it will become clear that their function in Agamben's oeuvre is far more complex precisely because paradigmatic.

The notion of a paradigm represents a crucial feature of Agamben's methodology that the Italian philosopher self-consciously elaborates in his texts. A paradigm is a singular phenomenon that stands for a class of other phenomena and simultaneously establishes the recognizability of this class. By exposing its own singular character, its own intelligibility it creates the context or makes perceptible for the first time that which it exemplifies.¹⁸⁵ In this way, however, its singularity is also deactivated and what qualifies it for its belonging to the class in the first place is suspended.¹⁸⁶ As a result, it both belongs and does not belong to this class, it retains its singularity, albeit in a suspended state.

There is no general principle that preexists concrete cases or is something that results from a consideration of a number of phenomena. In other words, a paradigmatic relation is irreducible to either inductive or deductive logic. Moreover, Agamben notes that the exhibition of the paradigm “constitute[s] a rule, which as such cannot be applied or stated.”¹⁸⁷ There is no formula: one is left with nothing but the paradigmatic intelligibility of a singularity that must be inhabited in order to understand the context to which it gives rise. A paradigm can be compared to a lens through which we perceive phenomena in a certain way. In a discussion following his lecture “What is a Paradigm?” at the European Graduate School in 2002, Agamben asserts that it “depends on the ability of the author to find and create a good paradigm.”¹⁸⁸ One can therefore assume it requires a certain amount of creative talent and that paradigmatic method is truly a poetic method. Agamben's most important paradigms such as the concentration camp or the

¹⁸⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 18.

¹⁸⁶ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 31.

¹⁸⁷ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 21.

¹⁸⁸ Giorgio Agamben, “Gesture, or the Structure of Art,” *European Graduate School*, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, 18 Aug, 2011, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgio-agamben/videos/gesture-or-the-structure-of-art/>.

figure of *homo sacer* are rather extreme and provoke strong reactions. Apparently, a “good” paradigm is one that allows us to perceive our situation in a radically new way, as Leland de la Durantaye suggests, so that a spark is “lit in our present.”¹⁸⁹

If translated into the literary realm, this paradigmatic method appears to offer an interesting approach to literature. Literary paradigms would then be literary works or aspects of literary works that are used to render knowable (recognizable) a set of problems or phenomena in the world by exposing their literary specificity while, importantly, preserving this specificity – if in a suspended state. Literary paradigms can never be said to be merely illustrative of philosophical theses, as they themselves give rise to the context that we are thus enabled to see. They are not illustrative but productive.

At first sight, it seems that to speak in paradigms means to speak ethically, for one does not impose pre-existing rules or prescriptions on phenomena. Yet, when considering more closely the legitimacy of the paradigmatic method, the nature of the suspended yet preserved singularity of the phenomenon on which it relies, appears fragile, ambivalent and open to doubts. At stake is the very status of the phenomena to be taken up by the paradigmatic relation (in our case a literary text). As de la Durantaye writes:

The fundamental question here, and the one on which the coherence of Agamben's method depends, is that of the relation of the paradigm as “real particular case,” or singularity, to what it is set apart to exemplify.¹⁹⁰

At stake is whether such a paradigmatic use in any way diminishes the phenomenon in question or not. Let us consider the extreme case of the concentration camp paradigm for which, not surprisingly, Agamben has been severely criticized.¹⁹¹ Does it or does it not depreciate the

¹⁸⁹ Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 245.

¹⁹⁰ de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, 219.

¹⁹¹ Jay Bernstein, for instance, criticizes Agamben for losing sight of the complex of institutions, practices and people through which human being were transformed into *Muselmänner*: the gas chambers, the guards, the huts, the watchtowers, i.e., the whole apparatus of violence of the Reich itself: “At no point does [Agamben’s] account veer off from the space of impossible sight to the wider terrain: from the victim to the executioners, to the nature of the camps, to the ethical dispositions of those set upon reducing the human to the inhuman. Just the inhuman itself fills Agamben’s gaze and hence ours.” Jay Bernstein, “Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror,” *parallax*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2004): 7. For other instances of criticism of Agamben’s disregard for historical particularities of the concentration camp see Ichiro Takayoshi, “Can

horror and tragedy of the holocaust – the particular fates of individual people? Is it ethical, after all, that such a catastrophe should be used to represent an entirely different context – such as our present political situation? To defend himself against such criticism, Agamben claims that the paradigmatic relation is conditioned on the phenomena's embeddedness in a particular historical context, and that one cannot thus separate exemplarity from the phenomenon's singularity:

The figures of the homo sacer and the camp serve as examples inasmuch as they are concrete historical phenomena. I do not reduce or cancel this historical aspect - on the contrary, I try first to contextualize them. And only then do I try to see them as paradigms through which to understand our present situation.¹⁹²

The legitimacy of the paradigm then depends on whether we believe that enough respect is paid to the uniqueness of the phenomena in question by the philosopher. It depends on whether the suspension of its singularity does not simply mean that this very singularity is eclipsed by its representative function. In the latter case, important distinctions may become blurred and concrete examples sublated into a philosophical argument that passes over the phenomenon's specificities. This tension lies at the very heart of Agamben's oeuvre and method. As de La Durantaye asserts:

Agamben sees the Nazi concentration camps as unique historical phenomena, and he treats them as representative ones. He uses paradigms heuristically - for how much they allow him to understand of the past, and for how starkly they throw the present situation into relief. The reader of *Homo Sacer* does not, of course, need to accept the legitimacy - whether logical or ethical - of ascribing such a double status to unique historical situations. It should be recognized, however, that this problem lies at the very center of his work.¹⁹³

Philosophy Explain Nazi Violence? Giorgio Agamben and the Problem of the Historico-philosophical Method," *Journal of Genocide Research* 13 (2011): 47-66; Philippe Mesnard, "The Political Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Evaluation," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, no. 1 (2004): 139-157.

¹⁹² Agamben cited in De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, 223.

¹⁹³ De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 226.

IV

To understand in more detail in what way literary paradigms function in Agamben's work, let us examine his treatment of "Bartleby," one of the most frequently alluded literary works in Agamben's oeuvre. Importantly, "Bartleby" appears in both Agamben's philosophical-aesthetic works (e.g., "Bartleby, or On Contingency", *Idea of Prose*) and also in his more political works (e.g., *The Coming Community*, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*). In *The Coming Community* and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, it takes the form of just an enigmatic reference along with the indication that the story is paradigmatic of a life that successfully resists and escapes apparatuses of power. Only in an essay "Bartleby, or On Contingency" does Agamben engage in what we could call a reading of the text. Yet, this simply means locating Bartleby inside a complex net of references. The literary ones include figures created by major modernist writers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin, Nikolai Gogol's Akaky Akakievich, Franz Kafka's courtroom clerks, or Gustave Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet. The recalcitrant scribe, however, also, and more importantly for Agamben, belongs to a philosophical constellation precisely as someone who well knows how to write but does not translate this ability into an act. It is because potentiality is always also potentiality not to act, which is the wager of Agamben's reading of Aristotle's definition of potentiality in *Metaphysics*. The crux of this impotentiality lies not in what one *cannot* do but what one *can not* do; it is about "being able to not exercise one's own potentiality,"¹⁹⁴ what we are able to withdraw from, what we can decide not to do (or be). This potentiality not to is precisely what prevents the potential from becoming actual¹⁹⁵ and what thus guarantees its autonomy from actuality. At the same time, potentiality remains preserved in any actualization precisely in the form of the suspension of potentiality not to. Potentiality names a subterranean dimension of our existence, located in the indifferent space, which manifests itself not in achievements but in privation or

¹⁹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43.

¹⁹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 181.

resistance. Bartleby, the enigmatic scribe, who “prefers not to” is the ultimate paradigm of this potentiality in which it reveals its weak yet subversive power.

The story functions as a central fragment in a vertiginous bricolage of ancient sources and philosophical references from antiquity to modernity that together make up Agamben's meditation on potentiality. Agamben circularly explores its crucial role in human creativity, its disturbing and threatening autonomy from Reason and Will, its location in the interstitial space between Being and Nothing, its retroactive reawakening of forgotten past possibilities. All this is read into Bartleby's enigmatic non-preference and the confusion of the “reasonable” narrator-lawyer.

In *Homo Sacer*, one of his political works, Agamben comes closest to what we might call a political prescription precisely by way of “Bartleby.” Pondering upon how to escape sovereign power, literature becomes a privileged resource of solutions and clearly triumphs over philosophy here represented by Schelling, Nietzsche, or Heidegger. For in an enigmatic sentence Agamben writes:

But the strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty is contained in Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener who, with his "I would prefer not to," resists every possibility of deciding between potentiality and the potentiality not to.¹⁹⁶

All this is found in an extremely dense chapter titled “Potentiality in Law,” where Agamben discusses the relationship between constituting and constituted power. While the former rests outside the state as the revolutionary and creative violence that posits law, constituted power is identical with the state and the violence that preserves law. The difficulty lies in thinking constituting power free from both constituted power and sovereignty that places itself precisely at the point of indistinction between the two.¹⁹⁷ In a characteristic move, Agamben claims that the ambiguity can be only resolved if the discussion moves from the field of political philosophy to ontology. Only if we grasp potentiality outside of its relationship to actuality precisely as

¹⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 48.

¹⁹⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 41.

potentiality not to, can we conceive the revolutionary, “creative” power independently. Problems of political theory can be resolved only through reinterpretation of basic ontological questions exemplified by literature.

Through paradigmatic use of “Bartleby,” Agamben puts into dialogue three disciplines – philosophy, political theory, and literature, nevertheless what it all actually means is not easy to figure out. Apparently, Bartleby manages to escape the cunning logic of sovereignty (the seemingly unresolvable inter-penetration of constituting and constituted power) simply by continuing to stubbornly hold on to his potentiality, i.e., his potentiality not to. Yet the difficulty seems to lie in identifying constituting power with Bartleby for the scribe does not posit a new law, he is not a preacher of an alternative vision. On the other hand, it is precisely in the absence of any authoritative claim or act (his non-preference) that Bartleby seems impossible for the lawyer (and the law) to relate to and to cope with. The former never offers a reason for his refusal to work and never actually denies the requests made of him, so that the authorities at hand are completely bewildered as to how to deal with the scrivener. The scrivener withdraws from any clear claim, act, or state, becomes unintelligible and thus leaves power confused. Evidently, Bartleby in his stubborn detachment from the demands and expectations of the world around him (in neither affirming nor negating the requests of his employer) manages to cut any relation from authority and remains outside and beyond it (like potentiality independent of actuality). Power that would pose as the effective challenge to the status quo, therefore, must be a weak power that dwells in the abyss of potentiality, which involves suspension of and detachment from the actual social milieu. Life which does not act in order to be what it is - life as perfect potentiality - is the space of a new ethics and politics.

It is striking, however, that Bartleby ends up being imprisoned in a death-like stupor, something to which Agamben seems to give little weight. If we understand Bartleby as the ideal of effective resistance to sovereign power, what does the cruel treatment of Bartleby by the society that does not know what to do about him imply? A challenge to power is in such a case

condemned to (self-) destruction, which leaves little room for sustainable political agency as many have already noted.¹⁹⁸

How is one to understand such a paradoxical model of subversive action in the context of the contemporary political situation? How to comprehend “Bartleby” as a paradigm? Is Agamben’s use of “Bartleby” merely an indication of his radicalism and extreme pessimism that finds redemption only in intense suffering? Is “Bartleby” only a hyperbole, a provocation that cannot be taken to the letter and rather serves to incite debate?¹⁹⁹ Does the tale make us understand ways of resisting that we would otherwise not consider?

We should first of all observe that Agamben’s reading of the tale’s ending is far from pessimist. In fact, unlike most interpretations, he does not regard Bartleby’s final paralysis in the Tombs in tragic light at all. At the very end of his exegesis in “Bartleby, or on Contingency,” he writes:

And it is here that the creature is finally at home, saved in being irredeemable. This is why in the end, the walled courtyard is not a sad place. There is sky and there is grass.

And the creature knows perfectly well “where it is.”²⁰⁰

Yet, it is quite difficult to follow Agamben in this reading. It is difficult, if not outright impossible, to sense such optimism in the profound negativity which indisputably permeates the tale. It requires great effort to see in Bartleby’s final death-life stupor any sign of redemption, or even see in it something other political subjects should resemble.

Some critics argue that this confusion over how to grasp Agamben’s ideas may be the result of mistaken attempts to grasp his ontological concepts in a sociological context, to which they may not belong. Agamben’s thought, writes Matthew Abbott,

¹⁹⁸ Paul Passavant, for instance, notes the simplicity with which Agamben’s sovereign can “decid[e] to kill or otherwise incapacitate the recalcitrant Bartleby.” Passavant observes the incongruity between Agamben’s description of the architecture of contemporary sovereign power and his plainly inadequate model for political action. See Paul Passavant, “The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 35, No. 2. (2007): 159-160.

¹⁹⁹ Dominick La Capra, “Approaching limit events: siting Agamben,” in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco, Steven DeCaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 161.

²⁰⁰ Agamben, *Potentialities*, 271.

[is] part of a critical theory that has as its primary target not the ontic political systems and material institutions of modern states but rather the (negative) metaphysical ground of those systems.²⁰¹

According to this logic, to simply apply Agamben's paradigms to our everyday political praxis is inappropriate. Figures such as *homo sacer*, or the concentration camp, cast light on the implicit inner logic and dynamics of politics. In a similar vein, "Bartleby" exemplifies no more than basic principles of any authentic resistance that should strive to deactivate the power apparatuses by subtracting itself from their hold. Such a form of opposition is in great contrast to how revolutionary politics is commonly understood and, as a consequence, can be said to open up other non-intuitive ways of resisting power structures that base themselves not on excessive activity and voluntarist revolt, but on withdrawal and immobility.

What is more, the way in which Agamben's paradigms are to be understood is suggested by his peculiar way of writing, which is, as has already been noted, circular, paradoxical and elliptical. It is writing that does not like to explain itself. Agamben's commentary in "Bartleby, or On Contingency" does not explicitly discuss problems of political agency and *Homo Sacer*, in turn, mentions "Bartleby" in one enigmatic sentence. Agamben does not elaborate on how his more philosophical meditations are to be translated into political action. Instead, a figure of Bartleby is inserted as a paradigm to be inhabited by readers to think for themselves – through the paradigm – about what is to be done. Instead of a prescription or a rule, the readers are to imagine the ethical/political agency proper in the light of the (non-)agency of Bartleby. By leaving things half-said and inserting the paradigm, Agamben may indirectly invite readers to go back to the story, which many of his interpreters actually do²⁰² and think together with it what the Italian philosopher might have on his mind. Neither literature nor philosophy can be expected to

²⁰¹ Mathew Abbot, *The Figure of This World. Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 4.

²⁰² See Arne De Boever, "Overhearing Bartleby: Agamben, Melville, and Inoperative Power, *Parrhesia*, no. 1 (2006): 142-162; Timothy J. Deines, "Bartleby the Scrivener, Immanence and the Resistance of Community" *Culture Machine*, no. 8 (2006), accessed Dec 14, 2016, <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/rt/prINTERfriendly/39/47>; De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 164-172; Jessica Whyte, "I Would Prefer Not To": Giorgio Agamben, Bartleby and the Potentiality of the Law," *Law and Critique*, no. 20 (2009): 309-324.

offer straightforward answers to our present dilemmas but they are good to think with, the Italian philosopher seems to be saying. The value of Agamben's oeuvre would then lie not so much in its elusive political proposals but rather in its transformative potential, i.e., in the engagement of its recipients.

In *The Coming Community*, however, Agamben insinuates at how Bartleby's indifference can be translated into a collective political action. He presents demonstrations at Tiananmen Square as an example of political activism that he envisions for the coming politics. Like Bartleby, the protestors are "inscrutable." As Agamben remarks: "What was most striking about the demonstrations of the Chinese May was the relative absence of determinate contents in their demands."²⁰³ The demonstrators at Tiananmen Square refused to assume any common identity or representation, any particular goal – something, Agamben claims, "the State cannot come to terms with."²⁰⁴ If the protesters had demanded anything in particular, the government could have found a way to defend itself and deny them. In this way, the group of protesters at Tiananmen Square were simply removing themselves from the "machinery" of the Chinese government. The Italian philosopher thus himself refers to very concrete political situation and particular opposition that he praises, hardly a sign of Agamben's lack of interest in "material political institutions of modern states" to allude to Abbott's argument.

Troublingly, the peaceful protests at Tiananmen Square ended in bloodshed. And in the face of such violent crackdown, it is hard to keep any optimistic perspective, as was the case with Bartleby. That the tragic ending plagues both the literary text and the historical case study is in any respect indisputably symptomatic, and necessarily presents a problem for anyone seriously interested in Agamben's politics. Authentic resistance inevitably ends in violence, which is affirmed by Agamben himself when he write at the end of his meditation on Tiananmen Square:

Wherever these singularities peacefully demonstrate their being in common there will be a Tiananmen, and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 84.

²⁰⁴ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 86.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Agamben's essay "Bartleby, or on Contingency" can be considered an homage to Gilles Deleuze as it paraphrases the title of the latter's famous essay on the scrivener - "Bartleby; or the Formula." Originally, it was even published along with the Italian translation of Deleuze's piece. The text itself deals with Deleuze's work only tangentially but it seems to affirm an alliance between the two thinkers precisely when Agamben acknowledges and further elaborates on the French philosopher's notion of the formula as radically indifferent.²⁰⁶ (After all, as we shall see, both philosophers see in Bartleby's passive being the promise of a new universality, a new kind of community.) The chapter in *Homo Sacer* that follows Agamben's discussion of potentiality in relation to sovereign power (and his allusion to Bartleby) is similarly centered around a literary work - Kafka's famous parable "Before the Law." Again, Agamben's commentary on the parable constitutes the argumentative core of the chapter. This time, however, his reference to the parable openly challenges the famous exegesis of "Before the Law" by Jacques Derrida and thereby the way the French thinker understands the nature of law.²⁰⁷ Derrida's reading treats the parable as a story of failure: the countryman fails before the law – his entrance into the law is endlessly deferred. In Agamben's much more joyous reading, the countryman triumphs over it. The literary text is used strategically in that by understanding "Bartleby" or "Before the Law" in an unexpected, original way the philosopher marks the distinctiveness of his position. The literary text then becomes a background against which different theories intersect and where their conflicts, explicit or implicit correspondences reveal themselves.

It is in this chapter where it becomes clear that in Agamben's interdisciplinary endeavor which involves philosophy, political theory and literature the final word belongs to theology. As was the case of Melville, in *Homo Sacer* Agamben does not engage in what we might call a *reading* of the literary text. Rather, he alludes to "Before the Law" as "exemplary abbreviation

²⁰⁶ Agamben, *Potentialities*, 255.

²⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 181-221.

of the structure of the sovereign ban”²⁰⁸ and places the legend in the midst of a series of references to Kant, Benjamin, Scholem and deconstruction. For the philosopher, the parable illuminates the nihilism of our day, in which law and tradition suffer the crisis of their legitimacy and have become hollow and without significance; they no longer apply.²⁰⁹ The boundaries between legal and illegal, between what is acceptable and what is not have become indistinct so that, as in Kafka's narratives, the smallest and most banal gesture can lead to severe consequences.²¹⁰ Like the law in the state of exception, the open door of the law in the parable, at least in Agamben's reading, asks nothing and imposes nothing except its own suspension and these

messianic aporias of the man from the country express exactly the difficulties that our age must confront in attempting to master the sovereign ban.²¹¹

His attitude then becomes a paradigm of agency in this situation that makes possible to “move beyond contemporary nihilism that defines the situation of legal exception and abandonment.”²¹²

As in the case of “Bartleby,” Agamben differs from other interpreters of the story in his unexpected optimism. He does not understand the parable to be a story of a failure, for him it is one of success. Agamben reads into the man of the country the intention, which is, however, *nowhere indicated* in the parable, to have the door shut

in order to interrupt the Law's being in force. And in the end, the man succeeds in his endeavor, since he succeeds in having the door of the Law closed forever (it was, after all, open “only for him”), even if he may have risked his life in the process.²¹³

Bartleby's resistance identified in the preceding chapter with potentiality, in front of which the law stands helpless, here becomes the obstinate waiting of a messianic figure who thus manages to interrupt the working of the law.²¹⁴

²⁰⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 49.

²⁰⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 51.

²¹⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 52-3.

²¹¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 56.

²¹² Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2008), 125.

²¹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 55.

²¹⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 57.

Agamben's commentary of Kafka's tale cannot be understood without grasping Agamben's meditations on Pauline messianism with relation to law in *The Time That Remains*. For it is there we find the following:

Messianism appears as a struggle, within the law, whereby the element of the pact and constituent power leans toward setting itself against and emancipating itself from the element of the *entolē*, the norm in the strict sense.²¹⁵

In other words, messianism is a means by which its revolutionary (potential) elements are separated from the normative and prescriptive (actual, legal) elements. The former is related to (and set against) normative law by rendering the latter inoperative, inactive, and inexecutable from within.²¹⁶ This means that potentiality of law is not realized (does not pass into actuality) for it remains confronted with its own potentiality not to be which is exemplified by the messianic figure (Bartleby, the man from the country). This is the meaning of messianic fulfillment:

Only to the extent that the Messiah renders the *nomos* inoperative, that he makes the *nomos* no-longer-at-work and thus restores it to the state of potentiality, only in this way may he represent its *telos* as both end and fulfillment. The law can be brought to fulfillment only if it is first restored to the inoperativity of power.²¹⁷

Yet, how does it then differ from the state of exception in which law is suspended in an analogous manner? Agamben, following Benjamin, differentiates between the virtual and real states of exception. In juridico-political terms, both are identical, the only difference lies in that in messianism there is no authority to proclaim the state of exception; there is only the messiah who subverts the power of such an authority.²¹⁸ While in the virtual state of exception it is only the empty form of authority that is operative, the *real* state of exception names a situation in which this empty form itself is abolished, in which the fulfillment of the law coincides with its

²¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 118-119.

²¹⁶ Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 97.

²¹⁷ Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 98.

²¹⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 57-8.

transgression without any authority as a guarantee. Life that remains involved with its potentiality not to itself becomes the law, the paradigms of which are Bartleby and the man from the country.

Ethical life can therefore be understood as an exemplary life of a human being that must not be translated into an applicable norm. The messianic law, as Agamben writes in *The Time That Remains*, is not a set of normative prescriptions, but “it is written with the breath of God on hearts of the flesh”²¹⁹ as the life of a community. In his discussion of the paradigm, Agamben alludes to the ancient *regula* of monastic orders. Before taking the form of a written document, it was materialized in the founder's way of life “envisaged as *forma vitae* – that is, as an example to be followed.”²²⁰ The law is materialized in a living community formed by a paradigm where “the life of each monk tends at the limit to become paradigmatic – that is, to constitute itself as *forma vitae*,”²²¹ i.e., ethical life understood not as a fact but as a possibility. Ethical life can be only communicated and taught ethically – through paradigms, exemplary lives – in Agamben's case – the literary characters from modernist novels (or pre-modernist tales).

VI

Agamben reads Bartleby as an angelic, messianic figure and his radical withdrawal as kerygmatic. Yet, Bartleby, as we know, is rather reluctant to run errands and, importantly, “prefers not to” go to the post office to deliver the message.²²² Agamben's forceful replanting of “Bartleby the Scrivener” and “Before the Law” into the context of philosophy might be a sign of a philosophical approach to texts that Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls “strong reading” characteristic for its passionate violence. To define it he quotes Deleuze: “I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous.”²²³ The

²¹⁹ Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 122.

²²⁰ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 21.

²²¹ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 22.

²²² Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener, A Story of Wall Street,” in *Melville's Short Novels. Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Dan McCall (New York & London: Norton & Company, 2002), 14-15.

²²³ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 43.

philosopher rapes the text in order to give birth to something that the original author would react to with horror. This sense of productive violence casts the light on what lurks behind Agamben's paradigmatic treatment of literature. He himself describes his approach to other writers' texts in less expressive but similar terms:

whenever we interpret and develop the text of an author [...], there comes a moment when we are aware of our inability to proceed any further without contravening the most elementary rules of hermeneutics. This means that the development of the text in question has reached a point of undecidability where it becomes impossible to distinguish between the author and the interpreter. Although this is a particularly happy moment for the interpreter, he knows that it is now time to abandon the text that he is analyzing and to proceed on his own.²²⁴

This point can be perhaps also understood to indicate the space of the paradigm, a moment when phenomena (historical, literary, scientific, philosophical) start to function as examples/paradigms in a philosophy to give rise to a new set of problems and questions.

After all, philosophy, for Agamben, is an act of elaborating a potentiality of a text (what he calls the text's *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*), whatever has remained unsaid or implicit therein. And while this takes place often beyond the intentions that make themselves felt in the original text, it must be recognized that Agamben's approach to his own texts is no different. He very much likes to leave things unsaid, half-said and merely hinted at, inviting readers to explore and further develop his condensed ideas. The notion of paradigm is a part of this strategy, as they allow Agamben to insinuate and hint at rather than explain, state or claim. As they are paradigmatic of what “cannot be applied or stated”, they are to be explored, developed by readers.

Strong philosophical reading of literature, according to Lecercle, is often provocative as it goes against the critical doxa (as in the case of Agamben's reading of Kafka's parable or “Bartleby”), it's productive, generates problems and is rather an intervention than an

²²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 13.

interpretation.²²⁵ Indeed, the point of using a literary text as a paradigm is to decisively intervene in the way we see our contemporary situation, to shift our perspective in terms of agency that is required, to move readers into a sphere of different perception.

The question for such reading is not whether it is faithful enough to the complexities and ambiguities of the literary text. In the light of its seductive mastery and its dazzling provocativeness, objections to selective reading may as well appear petty and narrow-minded. At the same time, it can be hardly denied that the philosopher's reading strategies, his emphasis on particular motives and omission of others definitely reveal something important about the theoretical project. It is relevant here to note the resistance of literature to the tasks assigned to it by philosophy. In case of the two literary paradigms of political agency we have presented here, it is undoubtedly the self-destructiveness of the agents that Agamben does not address. The disturbing passivity of Bartleby and the man from the country draws a more vivid picture of inoperative politics. On the other hand, their suicidal tendencies and tragic fate do not correspond to Agamben's optimistic vision. They seem to pay dearly for what he understands as their success, their messianic vocation – rendering law inoperative. One cannot help oneself but ask: does not Agamben present us with a model of political behavior that is from the outset suicidal, i.e., resigned to failure? Is it not then a failed paradigm, one which is so extreme that it is prevented from giving rise to or casting the light on a larger body of practices?²²⁶

It turns out that literary paradigms form a space where one is faced with questions about the status of philosophy, its autonomy, what is legitimate to expect from it and what is not. Should philosophy be expected to satisfy requirements of political praxis, answer clearly the questions asked by emancipatory movements, be in direct contact with the demands of political praxis? Given that paradigms do not let themselves be translated into an applicable rule, would it still be paradigmatic (i.e., ethical) and not preachy and moralizing? Or should philosophy remain autonomous, present us with condensed and perplexing gestures rather than prescriptions, let us

²²⁵ Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*, 61.

²²⁶ A similar argument is presented by Sergei Prozorov. See Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics. A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 53.

think for ourselves? Should it evade the demands for answer to the political dilemmas of the present and invite us to rethink our habitual ways of thinking about political agency in unexpected ways?

VII

At this point it is quite clear that there is a violence implicit in the use of a paradigm, its dark side. Wolfgang Schirmacher points it out in the discussion following Agamben's lecture at the European Graduate School.²²⁷ The act of taking something out of its context, suspending its usual functioning, suggests a violence committed on the phenomenon. The uneasiness hidden in Agamben's concept of the paradigm in relation to his actual use of literature is manifested by his paradigmatic use of Wallace Steven's poem "Description Without Place" in the conclusion of his lecture and his later puzzling denial of doing so in the discussion. Schirmacher challenged him precisely on that basis, accused him precisely of what Lecerle would say is "strong reading". In using the poem as a paradigm, Agamben is appropriating it for his own theoretical goals: "You exploited it," says the German philosopher, "took it out of context and made it a piece of you. Wallace Stevens will turn over in his grave, I'm sure." Paradigmatic display of a singularity is always simultaneously its suspension; in fact Agamben always emphasizes that "it is never possible to separate its exemplarity from its singularity."²²⁸ Yet, the production of paradigms involves, as Shirmacher notes, an authoritative act of suspending singularity and inserting the poem into a philosophical sphere with its distinctive set of concerns.

In the face of such a serious objection, Agamben, on the contrary, maintains in *The Coming Community* that paradigmatic relation is essential for thinking ethics. He suggests that it is in the nature of the paradigm that we should look for "exemplars of the coming community."²²⁹ Examples are introduced as a solution to the question of community that is not definable in terms of a shared identity or the subordination of individuals under a universal

²²⁷ Agamben, "Gesture, or the Structure of Art."

²²⁸ Agamben, *Signature of All Things*, 31.

²²⁹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 11.

concept. Being neither in the set they define nor outside of it, examples designate an indifferent, empty place identified by Agamben with the very linguistic potentiality of human beings that for him constitutes a fundamental condition for any collective co-existence. The community of singularities without identity is located in the interstitial and indifferent room of the example as the universally shared “linguistic life” subtracted from any identity or belonging to particular classes.

This life is purely linguistic life. [...] Exemplary being is purely linguistic being.

Exemplary is not defined by any property, except by being-called.²³⁰

Does not, however, the universality of linguistic potentiality necessarily presuppose the same violence like the one hidden at the core of the paradigmatic relation? Is not the force involved in the suspension of the singularity of a phenomenon necessary for it to become exemplary, in principle, the same force involved in the suspension of the particular characteristics of human beings necessary to reach the universal potential to communicate?

It is also in the *Coming Community* that we learn that it is “tricksters or fakes, assistants or 'toons, [who] are exemplars of the coming community.”²³¹ In his essay “Assistants”, Agamben identifies these figures with Kafka's and Walser's characters as well as the “helpers” from children's fairy tales. These literary “outsiders” are put in connection with the messianic assistants who in profane time “already possess the characteristic of messianic time: they already belong to the last day.”²³² Even though they seem to be quite lost and useless in this world, these unspectacular figures are the translators of the language of God which they render “into the language of men.”²³³ They proclaim as well as assist in bringing about the world redeemed: “On every side and all around us, the assistants are busy preparing the Kingdom.”²³⁴ In our dark times the literary paradigms populating Agamben's imagined coming community announce their

²³⁰ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 10.

²³¹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 10-11.

²³² Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 32.

²³³ Agamben, *Profanations*, 33.

²³⁴ Agamben, *Profanations*, 35.

exemplary emptiness, on the basis of which happiness and redemption can be found within human collectiveness.

The nonchalance with which paradigms suspend their particular characteristics must be associated with the force of Agamben's universalism that suspends particularities from human beings in order to reach the in-significant exteriority of linguistic capacity. His paradigmatic treatment of literature is related to his universalism; both render his project to be didactic in that both strategies are motivated by his desire to guide human beings toward ethical, happy life. This desire is ambivalent in that it is both taking into account and violating the specificity of beings, an ambiguity that lies at the very core of Agamben's "system".

Agamben calls his literary paradigms assistants and thus locates them at once in a subordinate position and in the most superior, once we consider what these characters actually express. This paradoxical position well depicts the contradictory nature of the paradigmatic use of literature. For literature is granted a narrow, yet privileged realm. It suffers under the violence of thought to be elevated and delegated with its most fundamental tasks. Literature is assigned with the mission to cast light on philosophy's crucial yet highly abstract concepts that lie at the very heart of the theoretical edifice, to hint at the practical import of these concepts, to implicate readers in thinking itself, and to affect them in a way that would profoundly transform them.

5. Bartleby as the Self-Portrait of a Philosopher: The Case of Gilles Deleuze

I

Time and again Deleuze asserted he was no interpreter of texts. He was not interested in hidden messages or intentions, he was interested in what (new, productive) use a text could be put to. The French philosopher considered the texts he worked on as machines engaged in the world, not holders of content one has to reveal by effortful interpretation. He claimed to be interested in what texts did, not what they meant.²³⁵ He was concerned not whether what this or that author wrote was correct or wrong but whether there are ideas he could use, transform, in order to work through problems he himself was intrigued by. There is a sense of self-centeredness, indifference toward anything else but the philosopher's own philosophic concerns. The resulting readings are thus simultaneously extremely detailed and but also strangely disinterested towards the texts and authors in question.²³⁶

In “Letter to a Harsh Critic” this indifference becomes an indifference to anything but one's own pleasure when Deleuze speaks about his use of other authors' texts in explicitly sexual (and violent) terms.²³⁷ The author is raped by Deleuze (“taken from behind”) and, as a consequence, a “monstrous” child is born, unwanted by the author in the first place. There is no sense of conversation or dialogue (and Deleuze did not believe in philosophical debates anyway²³⁸), but a sort of a strange non-encounter, a monologue, what Colin Davis even calls “private ejaculation.”²³⁹

It is on the basis of Deleuze's (and Alain Badiou's) treatment of literature (of Kafka, Beckett, Dickens, Proust) that Jean-Jacques Lecercle advocates for the violence of philosophical “strong

²³⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 7-8.

²³⁶ Colin Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 64.

²³⁷ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 6.

²³⁸ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 11.

²³⁹ Davis, *Critical Excess*, 61.

reading” which goes against the grain of received doxa. Lecercle's argument for the legitimacy of the “strong reading” is the following:

[B]oth philosophers really engage with literature and its texts, which gives their readings an urgency and depth that are characteristics of a strong reading, at the cost of rediscovering in literature the concepts independently elaborated by their philosophies, but with the benefit of new insights into the literary texts thus ‘exploited’: the strong reading submits the literary text to the rule of the concept, but it does not kill it, it makes it alive – it reaches parts of the text that ordinary literary criticism cannot reach.²⁴⁰

In other words, philosophical approach is truly passionate about art it becomes involved with, however, as it is based on the primacy of the concept over the complexity of the literary text, it is likely to result in literature being a mere illustration of a philosophical argument. Literature, however, argues Lecercle, can gain new insights from that approach, insights that would otherwise be not available. Yet, where is the novelty if what we gain in the first place is the already familiar philosophical concept? Are we not just seduced by the philosopher's passion and masterful style?

The accusation of philosophical didacticism is one of the main arguments raised against Deleuze's philosophy by Jacques Rancière. In *Cinema Fables*, for instance, Rancière criticizes Deleuze's treatment of film for developing a modernist meta-language that is, at times, simply applied onto the narrative and plot of the films in question.²⁴¹ Rancière accuses Deleuze of privileging philosophy over art and of developing a philosophical framework that determines, and therefore, nullifies art works in advance.

In the following chapter, I will turn to Deleuze's reading of “Bartleby” in his *Essays Clinical and Critical*,²⁴² to test the arguments against and in defense of Deleuze's treatment of art. I will also

²⁴⁰ Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*, 202.

²⁴¹ See the discussion of Deleuze's treatment of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 115.

²⁴² Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (New York: Verso, 1998), 68-91.

look at the political ramifications of such treatment. Deleuze's commentary of the short story should form the crux of the whole thesis not only because in comparison to Žižek and Agamben, his is more “literary”, attentive to detail and taking into account the context of the whole Melville's oeuvre. One cannot, therefore, just simply accuse him of scandalously reductive treatment like the other two theorists. More importantly, his reading has proved highly influential. Both Žižek's and Agamben's understanding of “Bartleby” are highly indebted to the Deleuzian version of the tale. This is also the case of others such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, all of whom refer to aspects of texts highlighted by Deleuze, debating how they should be understood. In fact, one can say that Deleuze's treatment of “Bartleby” has proved to be a seed out of which a whole new life of Bartleby Industry has sprung, including not only representatives of post-Marxist theory and their numerous commentators but also artistic and literary treatments discussed in the second chapter.

II

Deleuze's study of “Bartleby” is to be considered as an extension of the argument concerned with the so-called minor literature which Deleuze and Guattari worked on in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. In fact, all of the major features of minor literature are evoked in the “Bartleby” commentary; both writers are considered as a part of a single tradition and Melville's thoughts on American literature are said to anticipate Kafka's claims on literature.²⁴³

Minor literature is firstly defined by deterritorialized language²⁴⁴ which Deleuze variously describes as a stuttering, a becoming-other and a becoming-foreign of language: “opening up a kind of foreign language” within familiar language. Specifically, minor literature involves the liberation of a-signifying sounds to break apart conventional content and reassemble it in new ways. Secondly,

²⁴³ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 89.

²⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Poland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 16.

minor literature is political by its very nature. The history and the political context are never a given for the majority language has a tendency to exclude, repress, or subordinate such aspects of minorities. Therefore, in a minor literature “[t]he individual concern becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.”²⁴⁵ Thirdly, “everything takes on a collective value.”²⁴⁶ the individual enunciation has the value of a collective one. There is less emphasis on individual authors and talents. As it is alienated from the existing societies, its marginal status grants it the ability “to express another possible community,” “another consciousness and sensibility.”²⁴⁷ This possibility makes the artist a transformer whose action is less concerned with representation or critique of reality than with its unorthodox use, an experiment invoking a virtual community or a people yet to come. This theoretical framework applied originally to Kafka’s œuvre is the philosophical background of Deleuze’s reading of Melville’s “Bartleby.”

The tale, writes Deleuze, starts as an English novel – there is the law office with the two clerks who complement each other and the patriarchal lawyer. The arrival of Bartleby with his enigmatic speech and behavior, however, disempowers the father figure, disorganizes everything and inaugurates the asymmetrical, patchwork-like pattern characteristic of a minor literature:

Everything began à l’anglaise but continues à l’américaine following an irresistible line of flight (...)The American patchwork becomes the law of Melville’s oeuvre, devoid of a center, of an upside down or right side up.²⁴⁸

Importantly, this literary intervention corresponds to the American revolutionary project: both follow the same logic. Minor literature is not an individual affair, as we have already mentioned, “but a collective one, the affair of a people, or rather, of all peoples. Melville’s bachelor, Bartleby,

²⁴⁵ Deleuze, Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 17.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 77.

like Kafka's, must 'find the place where he can take his walks'...America."²⁴⁹ America itself must become "a patchwork", "a society of brothers, a federation of men and goods, a community of anarchist individuals, inspired by Jefferson, by Thoreau, by Melville."²⁵⁰ Bartleby's enigmatic and bizarre behavior stands not for a symptom but a radical cure of the (American) society:

Even in his catatonic or anorexic state, Bartleby is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the Medicine-Man, the new Christ or the brother to us all.²⁵¹

Bartleby foreshadows a new community, a new type of ethics.

Deleuze's whole reading and its political conclusions circulate around the "formula" that itself appears in the essay's title. It is the formula, after all, that "carves out a kind of foreign language within language"²⁵² and completely disrupts all the social bonds.²⁵³ Bartleby's utterance "I would prefer not to," according to Deleuze, "leaves what it rejects undetermined, confers upon it character of a radical, a kind of limit-function."²⁵⁴ Bartleby's phrase is an example of a-grammaticality- through its abrupt ending it subverts the ordinary rules of language without becoming entirely nonsensical. It occupies a borderland between sense and nonsense in language, the outside of language. Simultaneously, its abrupt ending makes it radically indeterminate. It cancels what it seems to refer to (what it *prefers not to*) as well as everything else it might "prefer" disrupting all reference and thereby also social rules that are conditioned by language:²⁵⁵

The formula I PREFER NOT TO excludes all alternatives, and devours what it claims to preserve no less than it distances itself from everything else. It implies that Bartleby stop copying, that is, that he stop reproducing words; it hollows out a zone of indetermination that renders words indistinguishable, that creates a vacuum within language. But it also

²⁴⁹ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 85.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 90.

²⁵² Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 71.

²⁵³ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 70.

²⁵⁴ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 68.

²⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 71.

stymies the speech acts that a boss uses to command, that a kind friend uses to ask questions or a man of faith to make promises. If Bartleby had refused, he could still be seen as a rebel or insurrectionary, and as such would still have a social role. But the formula stymies all speech acts, and at the same time, it makes Bartleby a pure outsider [*exclu*] to whom no social position can be attributed.²⁵⁶

Like Agamben's Bartleby, and about this the two authors seem to agree, Deleuze's scrivener does not resist by what he says or does in particular, which would make him intelligible and thus controllable, but by hollowing out a zone of indiscernibility (to paraphrase Deleuze). Bartleby's utterance proves to be a successful strategy how not to submit to the conditions of one's situation by throwing these very conditions into chaos. The narrator's conduct is based on a logic of presuppositions and assumptions that functions as a general grid underlying human social interaction. Bartleby, writes Deleuze, operates on an entirely different logic of preference that undermines presuppositions of language and the corresponding social norms. It is a kind of madness, one, however, that is internally consistent and one that in fact characterizes the emancipatory potential of American literature.

Is this not the schizophrenic vocation of American literature: to make the English language, by means of driftings, deviations, de-taxes or sur-taxes (as opposed to the standard syntax), slip in this manner? To introduce a bit of psychosis into English neurosis? To invent a new universality?²⁵⁷

As has been already mentioned, This reading of Bartleby's utterance as a politically subversive a-grammatical formula has been highly influential. However, any close-reading of the story will prove it reductive of the complexity of all what Bartleby has to say. It is true that the

²⁵⁶ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 73.

²⁵⁷ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 72.

variety of Bartleby's responses is something that Deleuze is aware of. He notes that Bartleby's utterance has

several variants. Sometimes it abandons the conditional and becomes more curt. I PREFER NOT TO. Sometimes, as in its final occurrences, it seems to lose its mystery by being completed by an infinitive, and coupled with *to*: "I prefer to give no answer," "I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," "I would prefer not take a clerkship," "I would prefer to be doing something else"...But even in these cases we sense the muted presence of the strange form that continues to haunt Bartleby's language.²⁵⁸

For Deleuze all these different versions belong to the same category. Can every Bartleby's statement, however, be classified as belonging to the formula? Can the phrases: "At present I prefer to give no answer"²⁵⁹ or "I would prefer to be left alone"²⁶⁰ still be considered as mere examples of the radically indeterminate "non-preference"? Anders M. Gullestad has noted that the formula increasingly tends towards positive preference instead of non-preference.²⁶¹ Moreover, Bartleby sometimes utters statements that have nothing to do with "preference" as such. For instance, in a reply to a narrator who doesn't grasp why Bartleby has finally given up copying, Bartleby indifferently asks: "Do you not see the reason for yourself?"²⁶² Or, when the narrator visits Bartleby in prison, the latter tells him: "I know you and I want nothing to say to you."²⁶³ Does the formula encompass all these statements? The formula starts to mutate in the second part of the story and loses its "I would prefer not to" character something Deleuze does not take into account when describing its *modus operandi*. As a result, he makes the formula "into a more of a monolith than it

²⁵⁸ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 69.

²⁵⁹ Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener, A Story of Wall Street," *Melville's Short Novels. Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Dan McCall (New York & London: Norton & Company, 2002), 20.

²⁶⁰ Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," 21.

²⁶¹ Anders M. Gullestad, "Loving the Alien: Bartleby and the Power of Non-Preference," *Exploring Textual Action*, ed. Lars Sætre, Patrizia Lombardo, Anders M. Gullestad (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 395-423.

²⁶² Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," 21.

²⁶³ Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," 32.

is – more a tree than a rhizome, to put it in Deleuzian terms.”²⁶⁴ It is worth noticing that theoreticians, such as Žižek or Agamben, follow this Deleuzian reading. Naturally, they do not share his interests in minor literature – but they base their understandings of the tale on the monolithic formula which, like Deleuze, they read as a subversive strategy.

III

These objections may as well leave Deleuze and Deleuzians unconcerned, as the philosopher refused to consider his commentaries on other authors as “interpretations” to which one might raise objections.²⁶⁵ It is not always clear, however, why Deleuze's readings couldn't be regarded as interpretations even if they are not after the “dirty secret” of the text and why it would not be legitimate to raise objections against such readings. In fact, when Deleuze writes,

I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous[.]

he does not forget to add an important condition:

It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying.²⁶⁶

We can, therefore, deduce that despite appearances Deleuze *does* believe in something like a validity of an interpretation. Invalid interpretation is one stating that which is, in fact, absent from the text.²⁶⁷ In order to make his claim about literature's power to deterritorialize (major) language (and the related political ramifications), Deleuze overlooks the twists and turns of Bartleby's utterances. One wonders whether the formula, i.e., what the French philosopher “had him saying,”

²⁶⁴ Gullestad, “Loving the Alien,” 418.

²⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze, Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) 3; Davis, *Critical Excess*, 59-60.

²⁶⁶ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 6.

²⁶⁷ Others have noted that schizoanalysis is not merely pragmatic and constructive but can be evaluated as distorted or valid. See Jesse S. Cohn, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Politics* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), 33-34.

is what Melville “actually said,” and whether it is not a case of such distorted interpretation, something that might question the validity of Deleuze's analysis on his own terms and the conclusions drawn.

Moreover, if Deleuze was most interested in creating concepts (and not “the truth” of the text) and the violence of his reading was aimed at the production of the new, we could as well ponder upon whether the notions emerging from his reading of “Bartleby” are really new or important modifications of already existing concepts. Has Deleuze not merely repeated all the key notions elaborated on already in the other, earlier works of his, namely *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*? If all his major ideas such as “a-grammaticality”, deterritorialization of language, literature as a means of invoking a people to come have been already dealt with elsewhere, is then his creative violence legitimate? Can he not be accused of merely applying a ready-made framework?²⁶⁸

In short, there seems to be a discrepancy between what Deleuze actually practices and what he says he practices. Rancière's criticism in “Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula,”²⁶⁹ his commentary on Deleuze's essay on “Bartleby” circulates precisely around this argument. Here, Rancière problematizes Deleuze's philosophical approach to literature in a similar way like he did with regard to his work on cinema, i.e. - by showing the contradictions between his conception of literature and the way he actually analyzes literary works. Even though the latter campaigned against interpretation, representation and other classical aesthetic doctrines, in practice, he failed to escape these categories. His treatment of literary characters is a case in point. When Deleuze writes in his essay “Literature and Life” that literature

²⁶⁸ For the problem of repetition in Deleuze's treatment of literature see Davis, *Critical Excess*, 59.

²⁶⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 146.

discovers beneath apparent persons the power of an impersonal” and that “literary characters are perfectly individuated (...) but all their individual traits elevate them to a vision that carries them off in an indefinite,²⁷⁰

according to Rancière, this makes Bartleby, Ahab, Pierre, Billy Budd and other favored characters not so much the carriers of radical immanence but rather its symbols. Literature's power of indeterminacy, its formulas, “metamorphoses”, its pushing the limits of language is demonstrated by “the givens of the story that function as a symbol of the power unique to literature.”²⁷¹ This quite often involves, Rancière notes, the analysis of an exemplary character as the driving force of the story, which itself is a return to the terms of classic Aristotelean poetics. Thus, what Deleuze's reading ultimately favors is not the undifferentiated emergence of affects, haecceities, and becomings, but an exemplary character who emblemizes becoming. On the one hand, he focuses on a radical materiality of Bartleby's utterance, on the other, he simultaneously makes it an allegory of radicalness of art (or philosophy).

“Bartleby” is the exemplary character and the exemplary literary text entrusted with the role of mediating between philosophy and politics, something we have encountered already in both Žižek and Agamben. As Rancière writes:

It is indeed a mission (...), a mission of clearing the way between ontology and politics, which Deleuze entrusts to literature in general and to Bartleby in particular.²⁷²

This assignment entrusted to literature, one of enacting political relevancy of a specific ontology, comes with crucial problems pertaining to the character of Deleuzian thought as such.

IV

²⁷⁰ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 3.

²⁷¹ Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, 154.

²⁷² Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, 164.

One is reminded of the importance of literary characters for Deleuze when in *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari evoke Melville's theory of the so-called "Originals" amidst characterizing philosophical concepts.

Melville said that great novelistic characters must be Originals, Unique. The same is true of conceptual personae. They must be remarkable, even if they are antipathetic; a concept must be interesting, even if it is repulsive.²⁷³

In short, the so-called "conceptual personae," the subjects of philosophical enunciations which act as key conditions for creating concepts (i.e., multiplicities composed of distinct, heterogeneous and inseparable elements²⁷⁴) should be like Melville's literary characters. At the same time, however, literary characters as elements populating art seem to belong to a different category – that of affective figures, beings of sensations, sensible inhabitants of a work of art that are involved with percepts ("non-human landscapes of nature"²⁷⁵) and affects ("non-human becomings of man"²⁷⁶). On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari strictly differentiate between art and philosophy with each happening on a different plane and making use of very different elements, on the other hand, they often render them indistinct. For instance, they claim that it is possible to think on one plane through the elements of the other and, more importantly, affective figures can become conceptual persona.

This does not mean that the two entities do not often pass into each other in a becoming that sweeps them both up in an intensity which co-determines them. With Kierkegaard, the theatrical and musical figure of Don Juan becomes a conceptual persona, and the Zarathustra persona is already a great musical and theatrical figures. The plane of composition of art and

²⁷³ Deleuze, Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 83.

²⁷⁴ Deleuze, Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 19.

²⁷⁵ Deleuze, Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 169.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

the plane of immanence of philosophy can slip into each other to the degree that parts of one may be occupied by entities of the other.²⁷⁷

In fact, it seems that an aesthetic figure can be at the same time a conceptual figure (like Zarathustra) and thus be that through which both concepts and affects/percepts are forged. Through affect and percept such fictional figures touch upon something singular yet impersonal and simultaneously they serve to create, modify new concepts by exemplifying it. Deleuze's preference of Bartleby (and other Melville's literary characters) seems to be based precisely on this chameleonic nature he seems to acquire in his work.

In spite of this suggested porousness, the difference between the two disciplines is still retained. The transport of "figures" from art's plane of composition to philosophy's plane of immanence necessarily involves "a radical transformation," as Ian Buchanan suggests,²⁷⁸ for it is only in philosophy that such characters make available fully formed concepts. What does such "radical transformation" consist in? It seems that in this passage from art to philosophy words are disarranged and relegated and what does not suit or what even stands in the way of the philosophical interest is simply left out.²⁷⁹

In his very last text, "Immanence: A Life," Deleuze uses literary examples such as a scene from Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend* to exemplify his "first philosophy" - the transcendental field, an a-subjective, pre-reflexive, impersonal form of consciousness, a plane of immanence, he calls "a life". At stake is the character of Riderhood, a villain whom otherwise everybody despise, who is fighting for his life.

Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death. The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that

²⁷⁷ Deleuze, Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 66.

²⁷⁸ Ian Buchanan, "Deleuze and his sources. Response to Anneleen Masschelein," *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, ed. Stephen Ross (London: Routledge, 2009), 41.

²⁷⁹ Anneleen Masschelein, "Rip the Veil of the Old Vision Across, and Walk Through the Rent: Thinking Through Affect in D. H. Lawrence and Deleuze and Guattari," *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate*, ed. Stephen Ross (London: Routledge, 2009), 28.

releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a “Homo tantum” with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the mist of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life....²⁸⁰.

When Lecercle comments on Deleuze's reading of the novel's chapter, he contrasts it with the commentary of Henry James who condemns the work to be the poorest of Dickens's fiction and a proof that the latter had no deeper (philosophical) understanding of human life.²⁸¹ James' reading, according to Lecercle, betrays his moralism and his conservative understanding of the novel. It was Deleuze's philosophy that allowed him to appreciate Dickens as a master and reveal his greatness which precisely lies in its attention to surfaces and singularities. It may be that it is a forcing and stifling of literature, Lecercle admits. On the other hand, Deleuze has, quite unexpectedly, highlighted a feature of the text ignored by a professional literary critic (i.e., James), in the light of which we can understand the whole novel.²⁸² In short, the philosopher brought a fresh understanding of the work which placed the heretofore overlooked chapter at the center of the whole novel and drew attention to neglected aspects of Dickens's talent.

This seems to be persuasive except for that it does not take into account the many aspects of the situation that for Deleuze seem totally unimportant. When Riderhood, a villain whom otherwise everybody despises, is fighting for his life, he is taken care of by others with tenderness. When he gets better, everyone turns cold again. Deleuze is not concerned about Riderhood himself or his particular situation before and after the accident, the fact that it actually stayed the same. Riderhood

²⁸⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence. Essay on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zero Books, 2001), 29.

²⁸¹ Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*, 63.

²⁸² Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*, 64.

remained the same outsider, the same villain who despises everybody and whom everybody despises. The community formed around him founded on the “impersonal” quickly disintegrated. The spark of a life that he becomes for a moment does nothing to transform the structure of Riderhood's situation. With regard to changing his position in the society it remained powerless. As suggested by Peter Hallward, this is of no importance to Deleuze who is interested in the virtual dimension of a life, the “homo tantum” in Riderhood that, however, becomes manifest only when the actual person who embodies it “and who is alone capable of actively relating to other individuals is literally put out of action.”²⁸³ At stake is a power working through, rather than belonging to, the individual. Hallward talks about “the paralysis of the subject or actor” and our “limitation to pure contemplation or in-action.”²⁸⁴ According to him, Deleuze “abandons the decisive subject in favour of our more immediate subjection to the imperatives of creative life or thought.”²⁸⁵

Hallward's accusation that Deleuzian philosophy bears little relevance for actual political praxis is a complaint echoed by Rancière's commentary on “Bartleby”. His disbelief in Deleuze's political usefulness stems mainly from Deleuze's paradoxical image of a “a new society of brothers”, with which he closes the story. The Utopian community is pictured as “a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others.”²⁸⁶ This figure of the wall of stone relates uneasily to Deleuze's emphasis elsewhere on “world in process,” “taking flight on the horizon”²⁸⁷ and “breaking through the wall.”²⁸⁸ While Rancière understands this image to help Deleuze distance his nomadic enterprise from the dominant discourse on “mobility” and “flexibility,”²⁸⁹ he is concerned that its paradox alludes to the problematic political task that

²⁸³ Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (New York: Verso, 2006), 153.

²⁸⁴ Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, 163.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 86.

²⁸⁷ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 89.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, 162.

Deleuze assigns to literature (and in fact to philosophy as well), namely that of “inventing a fraternal political people.”²⁹⁰ Rancière is certainly unequivocal in this regard: “Literature opens no passage to a Deleuzian politics,”²⁹¹ he writes. He suspects that the indistinction of Bartleby’s utterance, his radical non-preference, comes dangerously close to political impotency. He questions its potential of disruption. He asks: “How can one make a difference in the political community with this indifference?”²⁹² More, he believes that a messianic figure such as Deleuze’s Bartleby ought not only to oppose the old law but, simultaneously, institute a new norm, a new justice. And it is here, that we are faced with contradiction:

Under the mask of Bartleby, Deleuze opens to us the open road of comrades, the great drunkenness of joyous multitudes freed from the law of the Father (...) But this road leads us to contradiction: the wall of loose stones, the wall of non-passage. We do not go on, from the multitudinous incantation of Being, toward any political justice.²⁹³

While Deleuze invokes a seductive image of a new type of fraternal liberty, Rancière has serious doubts about the ability of Bartleby’s message of non-preference to disrupt the law and institute this new type of non-hierarchical assembly as a new norm. Again, neither the text itself nor Deleuze’s reading of it provides us with satisfactory answers. Like in the case of Riderhood, Bartleby appears unable to thwart his tragic fate or, more generally, that of the society and the business, after all, continues as usual. Like in the case of Agamben, we might question the messianic function of a character who refuses to run any errands – not even that which philosophy would like him to.

V

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, 164.

²⁹² Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, 163.

²⁹³ Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, 164.

With philosophical readings of literature such as the interpretations of “Bartleby” by Žižek, Agamben and Deleuze, it is never only the literary text that is in question but a whole complex and sophisticated thought system the key concepts of which are exemplified by literature. To deal with the particular reading, one must deal with the whole philosophy that frames such commentary. Simultaneously, there must be a kind of distrust on the part of the critic in what the theory in question claims it is doing with literature. If one falls for the philosophy (philosopher), it is difficult to remain critical. With Jean-Jacques Lecercle, for instance, one has a feeling that he is too much of an admirer of Deleuze's thought to really question the latter's treatment of literature. But is it possible not to get caught up in a transferential relationship with a philosopher whose work, after all, one deems worth the while? One could argue that without the transferential relationship, one would not be interested in the theory in the first place. In his study of “overreading” by philosophers, Colin Davis eloquently characterizes this conflict:

I should confess that in the treatment of overreading there is a conflicted interest on my part: I want to follow (in order to enjoy) the daring, exhilarating moves taken by the various overreaders; at the same time I don't want to abandon the skepticism towards them which characterises me as, and condemns me to be, a more pedestrian critic.²⁹⁴

One reason why it is so difficult to keep the balance is that the philosophers in question are not *only* philosophers, they are also writers, artists in their own rights (very much in the tradition of a certain continental philosophical lineage from Plato to Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and others). The form of their philosophy is creative, writerly, one that incorporates literary forms. Their writing is, in other words, persuasive, seductive, performative. Their theories, so to say, are forms of practice, an intervention.

²⁹⁴ Davis, *Critical Excess*, xiv.

In *Dramatizing the Political: Deleuze and Guattari*,²⁹⁵ Robert Porter and Iain MacKenzie see this as a positive aspect of Deleuze's philosophy, and more importantly, an aspect which is itself political. While it is possible to see Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of art, in the wake of Rancière's criticism, as an example of “pedagogical paternalism”, a philosophical didacticism of sorts which robs art of its autonomy, this view is insufficient. Porter and MacKenzie speak about Deleuze–Guattarian method of dramatization. At stake is “making an event out of thought”, dramatizing concepts in aesthetic terms in order for them to pass over into a sensation, to bring them to life “in a way that affectively resonates, provokes and stays with those who engage” the texts in question.²⁹⁶ Their theory thus allows for participation and experimentation on the part of reader. What is the use, they ask, of “fashioning concepts that simply fall flat and dead on the ground?”²⁹⁷ Through their “dramatical method,” Deleuze and Guattari thus follow Marx's dictum on the need for philosophy to change the world.

The question, however, is why such power ought to legitimize reductive reading, as implied by Porter and MacKenzie, and what the relationship between excessive interpretation and the power of the resulting concepts actually is. For it seems that they are mutually dependent. As we have seen, artworks are subordinated to the concepts they are supposed to bring to life. Once it involves art works to communicate concepts, the dramatic method does not exist without a violent appropriation - the latter is its very condition. The dramatic method is in such a case inseparable from violence and should be always thought as such.

To what kind of ethical or political posture, stance or action are readers invited to take by the dramatic method? What kind of lesson is carried out by Melville's “Bartleby”? For Deleuze, Bartleby embodies the catatonic, zero-point state that points to an absolute renunciation of agency

²⁹⁵ Robert Porter, Iain MacKenzie, *Dramatizing the Political: Deleuze and Guattari*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

²⁹⁶ Porter, MacKenzie, *Dramatizing the Political*, 141-2.

²⁹⁷ Porter, MacKenzie, *Dramatizing the Political*, 142.

(“the nothingness of the will”²⁹⁸), the paralysis of the will that allows for an encounter with a life as a virtual power to take place, an encounter one has no conscious control over. This approach seems to be indifferent to any kind of pragmatics, any kind of practical political goal or effect, it may not change one's circumstances in any decisive way and may very well be ultimately self-destructive.

On the other hand, political importance may lie precisely of such experience of sensual rupture, one that is paralyzing and impossible to act upon.²⁹⁹ The contemplation of the virtual involves a profound estrangement, one that is necessary to imagine any authentic alternative, any radical unforeseen potentiality that is not only a variant of the status quo.³⁰⁰ Obviously, there is an ethical dilemma involved, between the power of the virtual to problematize the possible and the present sense of urgency, between the actual community and virtual people to come,³⁰¹ a tension that lies at heart of Deleuze's politics.

VI

In our readings of “Bartleby” commentaries by Žižek, Agamben and Deleuze we have repeatedly stumbled over the very same problem despite the differences between respective philosophical systems. For all three philosophers “Bartleby” as a literary example is a device to translate an abstract ontology into political realm based on the belief that radical politics requires a radical redefinition of fundamental philosophical questions. For all three thinkers Bartleby becomes a peculiar hero who holds the power to problematize the possible inviting readers of theory to see the world from an extreme, alienated (Bartlebian) perspective as the only space where authentic

²⁹⁸ Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 71.

²⁹⁹ Steven Shavero, “The 'Wrenching Duality' of Aesthetics: Kant, Deleuze, and the 'Theory of the Sensible,’” <http://www.shavero.com/Othertexts/SPEP.pdf>, 12.

³⁰⁰ Shavero, “The 'Wrenching Duality' of Aesthetics,” 13.

³⁰¹ “The fundamental problem is this: the Deleuzian people, being always a people to come, is indeterminate (it has neither territory nor borders nor traditions), it is deterritorialized (and therefore capable of being created by thinkers), but can it properly be a ‘political’ locus? Politics has to deal with a people that is other than virtual, potential or yet to come.” Philip Mengue, “People and Fabulation”, *Deleuze and Politics*, ed. Nicholas Thoburn, Ian Buchanan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 231.

alternatives to our lives can be imagined. It is a question beyond the scope of this thesis whether the philosophical violence to the literary text (whereby the exemplification of philosophical concepts occurs to the detriment of its complexity) is an index of the forceful nature of thought characteristic merely of the authors in question, a certain Postmarxist tradition they represent, or philosophy as such and its vexed relationship to literature and art in general.

The Žižekian position of the psychoanalyst who refuses to answer demands and Agamben's paradigmatic speech that leaves things unexplained correspond to the "inscrutability" of Bartleby. Something similar can be claimed about the way in which Deleuze repeatedly praised the solitude and withdrawal from the world by writers, artists and literary figures as the very condition of their true connection with the "people to come."³⁰² The alienation from the actually existing community manifested by writers and artists, by art and philosophy, is like the position of tribal chief who holds distance from his group as conceptualized by Pierre Clastres and later by Deleuze and Guattari.³⁰³ The chief is an exceptional individual who does not command and whose real strength lies in his distance from the group that enables him to study the tribe as a whole. He exists in the margins. It is only because of the distance that the chief is able "to discern a number of possibilities", "to fabulate and summon up the missing people."³⁰⁴ On the other hand, the distance, as one imagines, makes him unable to truly participate and take action in the life of a community towards which he remains estranged. The inaccessibility and withdrawal of Bartleby corresponds to the inaccessibility and withdrawal of the philosopher. In this sense, Bartleby is truly the self-portrait of the philosopher.

It is in this context that one must think of all the assistance literary figures like Bartleby provide to philosophy: how they help to keep the very distance the philosopher needs to keep from "real" people, i.e., his "tribe". Bartleby whether as a "paradigm", "psychoanalytic intervention" or

³⁰² See, for instance, Deleuze, Guattari, *Toward a Minor Literature*, 17.

³⁰³ Jérémie Valentin, "Gilles Deleuze's Political Posture," trans. C.V. Boundas, S. Lamble, *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. C. V. Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 195.

³⁰⁴ Valentin, "Gilles Deleuze's Political Posture," 196.

“conceptual persona” functions as a means of how to keep the distance intact. It remains an impossible example to be grasped and experienced but not to be followed for one cannot in any way consciously manipulate or control what takes place irrespective of our conscious intervention, the impersonal force of “a life”, the death drive or the bare life one always inherently is and which Bartleby exemplifies. The key philosophical concepts “Bartleby” comes to represent are incompatible with politics in the practical sense, the world of concrete struggles that require strategies aimed at particular results. Philosophy needs the literary example to be able to intervene in the community while remaining outside of it. And “Bartleby” becomes the embodiment of the distance enacting its power as well as its political limits. Literature becomes the place of the ambivalent encounter between philosophy and politics. Stripped of its own autonomy, it becomes at once the guarantee of philosophy’s political relevance and the guardian of the latter’s autonomy.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the phenomenon of Bartleby as a popular reference in academia, contemporary culture and philosophy. In each discipline it has tried to cast the light on the motives that drive literary scholars, writers or philosophers to engage with the story. Furthermore, it has explored the peculiar manner in which each discipline treats the literary text.

The overwhelming interest in “Bartleby” in academia is explained via the hysterical nature of the critical enterprise a priori suspicious of power. The reoccurring patterns of scholarly readings, which at first sight appear contingent, suggest an unconscious investment and disavowed motives. At stake is the identification with the scrivener and hostility towards the lawyer suggesting unreflected class antagonism between a humanity professor and a lawyer. “Bartleby” becomes an effective tool to unmask the ruling ideology as deficient. It is challenged by a belief system, which the critic holds to be more ethical and which Bartleby is made to stand for. The poetical power of the story, the “Bartleby effect,” lies in the void at the heart of the story. Bartleby's impenetrability invites new and new attempts to assign meaning to what is supposed to drive the protagonist's strange actions. The interpreters become unconsciously implicated in the story, uncannily repeating what the narrator does. The Bartlebian critic becomes trapped by the tale, hunted by the void at the heart of the story. She is either confronted with her own interpretive violence which cancels out the void or evolves endlessly around it.

“Bartleby” as a central reference in contemporary literature and art is examined in George Perec's *Life: A User's Manual*, Enrique Villa Mata's *Bartleby & Co* and Etienne Chabaud's *Disclaimer*. The vacuity of the tale serves as a musical theme inviting variations. The void of the original story is being played around both on the level of form and content. In Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* Bartlebian narrative unavailability becomes the uncanny silence of the numerous characters resembling wax figures in a museum. Bartleby's reluctance to express himself is similarly mirrored by the protagonists of Vila Matas' *Bartleby & Co*, writers who decide not to express themselves by

means of literature. This applies to the narrator himself and thus problematizes the text's own status; the work refuses to assume its own authority (of a literary text). Chambaud's *Disclaimer* seems to employ the equivocality of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" to enhance the work's impotent circle of claims and disclaims, its own narcissism. These cultural productions manipulate the story in a way that assists the works in their self-crippling strategies, attempts to withdraw from or complicate the process of their communication with the outside world. They emphasize the poetical and the political potential that lies in inaction and withdrawal.

The subversive potential of Bartleby's peculiar passivity becomes a central theme in contemporary philosophy as well. Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze radically decontextualize the story and insert it - as a central piece - to complete the jigsaw puzzle of their philosophy. The philosopher is primarily not interested in understanding of the story in its complicatedness, he rather cares about its practical application. He makes use of it to solve the interrelated problems of ontology, ethics and politics. The reading, simultaneously, centers on what Deleuze coins as "the formula" - Bartleby's utterance of "I would prefer not to" and its variations.

In Žižek's oeuvre literary examples such as "Bartleby" articulate the ultimate wager of his whole theoretical project: a proposal of effective political agency. At the same time, as instances of actual praxis that (as Žižek believes) reveal disavowed impasses of theory, they stage his own theory's deadlocks, i.e., his political proposals that are impossible to realize.

Literary examples in Žižek's thought exemplify the death drive, the inhuman, monstrous subjectivity that never fits in any symbolic configuration and therefore is a space of abysmal freedom from which any social reality can be radically questioned and new possibilities perceived. In particular, Bartleby's formula becomes a way in which such theory of the human subject is translated into a proposal of concrete politics – the politics of withdrawal. Bartleby's "I would prefer not to," enacts the radical negativity of subjectivity and is the expression of the unconscious drive. Through its reluctance to engage in any way with the social reality, its preference for the negative that remains independent of the ruling ideology and the opposition that feeds off it, it

reveals the socio-political organization of reality in its contingency. It thus forms a basis for any emancipatory politics.

Since it remains unclear how it is possible to connect the pragmatic aspects of such politics of withdrawal with its unconscious elements, “Bartleby” becomes the embodiment of Žižek’s failure to articulate an effective political project. At stake is the incompatibility between the realm of pragmatic politics and the transcendental, the unconscious, the Real; between politics and philosophy. On the other hand, this juxtaposition can be understood as “a parallax view”, impossible short-circuiting between the two irreconcilable realms which thus allows us to view each element from a new perspective. Through fiction we can actually experience the transcendental condition of our being (experience which would be otherwise unbearable) and at the same time gain distance from social and political reality, the naturalness of which is thus questioned. As a result, the use of literary examples is a strategy to bring about more indirect transformative effects of the theory.

Agamben’s frequent recourse to “Bartleby” is related to the great importance he assigns to literature as such. Literature, in his view, provides a unique access to an ontologically prior experience of language – language in its communicability regardless of its content. While literature can mediate such experience, it cannot think it. To have access to and think such experience seems only possible in between philosophy and literature – in the space of a literary paradigm, a function that “Bartleby” assumes in Agamben’s oeuvre.

Agamben’s reading of “Bartleby” is much more nuanced than Žižek’s, yet, in the end, he is also interested mainly in the formula as an example of a key notion of Aristotelian *potentiality* which, when exemplified via Bartleby, emerges as the ultimate model of poetic, ethical and political practice. At stake is Bartleby’s reluctance to actualize his potential (to write, to respond, to leave), his refusal to leave the sphere of impotentiality – i.e. that which prevents potentiality to turn into actuality. Affirming the potentiality of existence before and beyond any actualization, he subtracts his being from the hold of the apparatuses of power. Authority becomes helpless when confronted

with the withdrawal from any intelligible claim, act or state – it is deactivated. Given the death-like paralysis and ultimate isolation of Bartleby, however, it remains a question how such a concept of potentiality can be mobilized by emancipatory movements and whether such endeavor is not from the outset destined to failure.

The ethics and politics of impotentiality is communicated through (literary) paradigms. Paradigm is a singular phenomenon which by exposing its own singularity establishes the recognizability of a class it is exemplary of. In order to understand the context to which it gives rise, it must be inhabited: thought and experienced. A good paradigm is one that allows us to perceive our situation in a radically new way. It has the power to move us, disturb us, politicize us. Paradigmatic method, however, also involves violence – it involves taking something out of its original context in order to fulfill its representative function. Literature as a paradigm in philosophy, as in the case of “Bartleby”, has its particularities suspended via authoritative philosophical act. It is the same philosophical force of universalism that strips human life of all particular predicates in order to reach generic potentiality.

The most influential philosophical reading of “Bartleby” is certainly that of Gilles Deleuze. His study of “Bartleby” is an extension of the argument concerning the so-called “minor literature”. The theoretical framework (of deterritorialized language, inherently collective and political nature of minor literature, its anticipation of a future community) applied originally to Kafka’s oeuvre is the philosophical background of Deleuze’s reading.

Deleuze reads Bartleby as a revolutionary figure, a messiah announcing a new society of anarchist individuals that is horizontally structured. Deleuze’s reading, like that of his colleagues, centers around Bartleby’s formula as socially subversive. It cancels what it refers to (what it prefers not to) as well as everything else it might prefer thereby disrupting all reference and social rules conditioned by language. Deleuze reads Bartleby’s formula as radically indifferent but he does not take into account all what Bartleby has to say and by treating his various utterances as a more-or-less monolithic formula he neglects the character’s complexity.

Even though Deleuze denies that he is in fact involved in an interpretation of the text he still seems to differentiate between valid and invalid reading of a text. There is a discrepancy between what Deleuze practices and what he says he practices. He campaigns against the classical aesthetic doctrines but fails to entirely escape these categories. As Jacques Rancière argues, Deleuze's particular focus on literary characters is indicative of his disavowed return to Aristotelian poetics. Characters such as "Bartleby" are not so much carriers of radical immanence but rather its symbols. While Deleuze, on the one hand, strictly differentiates between philosophy (that creates concepts) and art (that produces affects), his use of "Bartleby" indicates that the border between the two disciplines is far from distinct. Literary characters, sensible inhabitants of a work of art involved with percepts and affects, can be, at the same time, conceptual personae – subjects of philosophical enunciation. Their entrance into the realm of philosophy, however, is conditioned by a transformation: whatever does not suit philosophical interest is simply left out. Deleuze thus dramatizes concepts in order to make an event out of thought, to bring it to life and invite readers to participate in them, experiment with them. Artworks are employed to communicate concepts; i.e., they are subordinated to concepts which they are supposed to bring to life.

As in the thought of Žižek and Agamben, Deleuze assigns to literature a political task: to invoke a people to come, to express and invent another possible community. "Bartleby," in the reading of the French philosopher, foreshadows a new brotherhood of men, a new type of ethics. However, the indistinction of the character's utterance, his non-preference, comes dangerously close to political impotency. It is unclear to what extent the radical indifference of Bartleby is able to actually disrupt the old order or even institute a new norm, a new justice. In Deleuze's commentary we are faced with an image of a joyous community of comrades freed from hierarchy but we are blocked from actually reaching it. For neither the text itself nor Deleuze's reading of it provides us with answers to questions of how this kind of indifference is to bring about such a community.

"Bartleby," in its role of the literary example, hides a tension in the heart of all three philosophies. While necessary for thought to emerge as politically relevant (appearing at crucial

points where politically relevant arguments are being articulated), “Bartleby” emerges as the Achilles heel registering contradictions and incongruities in the conceptual framework and strategies used undermining the apparent philosopher’s mastery. In Agamben’s oeuvre it marks the tension inherent in his paradigmatic method: between the suspension of the example’s staged singularity and its proclaimed preservation. Whether we judge Agamben’s thought as ethical or not follows from how we evaluate his treatment of (literary) paradigms. Moreover, “Bartleby” highlights the problem of how to understand a model of political agency presented in the figure of the self-destructive scrivener. We can discern a similar problem in the other two philosophies as well. In Žižek’s thought the literary example indicates the ambivalence between literature as a model of ethical and political agency to be followed and a cathartic, transformational experience with real effects that cannot be predicted in advance. Similarly, in Deleuze’s oeuvre it reveals the conflict between the present sense of urgency, the demands of the community the philosopher addresses, and the contemplation of the virtual which involves a profound estrangement from that community necessary to imagine any authentic alternative, any radical unforeseen potentiality that is not only a variant of the status quo.

The political project that “Bartleby” comes to represent is as if split from within. On the one hand it is introduced as a form of politically desirable agency. Yet, when pondering upon aspects of the tale not taken sufficiently into consideration, such as Bartleby’s ultimate self-destructiveness and loneliness, as we have already mentioned, such model becomes impossible to act upon. Furthermore, it remains unclear how that which, according to the philosophers, drives and conditions truly authentic ethics and politics (i.e., what lies behind Bartleby’s conduct be it the death drive, bare life or radical immanence) is supposed to inspire emancipatory movements as this very condition is incompatible with conscious will and judgment. It remains outside of the political sphere which requires goal-oriented collective action.

At the same time, “Bartleby” finds itself located in a sublime space where it is hoped readers will experience transformation, a change of perspective the effects of which are much more indirect.

The use of “Bartleby” in philosophy hints at a specific understanding of philosophy as such, one that sees itself as an intervention in the world. Such undertaking involves violence: “Bartleby” is let to exemplify the most crucial theoretical concepts while being subject to radical decontextualisation. Theory makes *violent* use of literature to effectively intervene in the world of its readers – to *force* them to think.

The provoking unintelligibility of Žižekian philosopher-psychoanalyst, the implicitness of Agamben’s paradigmatic speech and the solitariness of Deleuze’s writer-visionary correspond to Bartleby’s similarly vexatious loneliness, inscrutability and withdrawal. As far as the philosopher’s ambiguous relationship to the community he addresses is concerned, Bartleby is the mirror in which the philosopher sees himself reflected. In this sense, the respective readings emerge as the philosophers’ self-portraits, sites of an ambivalent encounter between literature, philosophy and politics.

“Bartleby’s” remarkable presence in the culture of the beginning of the 21st century lies in its becoming of an influential emblem of an ethical, authentic opposition to power for artists, philosophers and activists. It has become a trope of ethics and counter-intuitive politics that find their strength in withdrawal, inaction, inscrutability which the activists make use of in their politics and which are employed as poetical and rhetorical strategies in the discussed cultural productions. Via the focus on Bartleby’s outsidership literary critics emphasize their own sense of marginalization and superiority as humanities scholars while contemporary cultural productions inspired by the tale, find poetical and ethical power in the refusal of self-assertion. In Bartleby’s “I’d prefer not to” political theorists and leftist activists find a literary precedent of their own model of authentic ethics and politics. While such strategies seem to be effective poetical and rhetorical devices in art or philosophy, their function in the realm of politics is more troublesome.

The appropriation of the story by artists, activists and philosophers poses questions of literature’s autonomy and the social function of a literary text. These modes of reading are avowedly non-exegetical in that the point is not to engage in slow-reading that allows one to tease

out the multiple meanings of a text. Also, they are non-historical and non-contextual: for the intellectuals in question the differences between Melville's milieu and their own is not of importance. What can be after all more apart than a nineteenth-century tale and politics in the twenty-first century?

By foregoing its autonomy, the literary text gains a new relevancy, a new function in another discipline – of art, political activism or philosophy, which make use of it for their own goals. These “non-literary,” pragmatic readings make literary history newly relevant and this new relevancy is naturally something every believer in the importance of literature should applaud. In case of political activism and philosophy we have discussed, the complexity of the literary text in question – that which does not fit in the analogy established – remains outside of the picture problematizing it. The ghost of the tale's suspended literariness persists and what remains outside problematizes the inside. Literature strikes back as it brings to light debatable aspects of the particular politics put forward by philosophy we have discussed, the complexity and uneasiness of co-existence of art and philosophy and the realm of politics. The potential as well as difficulty of connecting politics and the arts is thus affirmed.

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Summary

Dizertační práce se zabývá popularitou povídky Hermana Melvilla „Písař Bartleby“ (1853) na poli literární teorie a kritiky, umění a filozofie. Snaží se uchopit, jakou roli pro současné literární teoretiky a kritiky, spisovatele, umělce a filozofy hraje a proč je pro ně důležitá. Snaží se popsat rozdíl mezi přístupem literárních vědců a způsobem, jímž s tímto literárním textem zachází umění, literatura a filozofie.

Povídka „Písař Bartleby“ se v posledních několika desetiletích stala jedním z nejoblíbenějších textů americké literatury mezi literárními kritiky a teoretiky. Vzniklo a nadále vzniká tolik interpretací, že se začalo hovořit o tzv. „Bartlebyovském průmyslu.“ První kapitola se zabývá obecnými vzorci, jež lze v těchto interpretacích rozpoznat. Ukazuje se v nich povaha literární kritiky, jež se apriori vymezuje vůči moci. Pro mnoho kritiků se „Bartleby“ stal efektivním nástrojem pro odhalení nedostatečnosti vládnoucí ideologie. Postoj Bartlebyho, jak jej chápou tato čtení, tuto ideologii zpochybňuje a představuje alternativní, etičtější společenský systém či světonázor. Gravitační síla povídky je uchopena skrze psychoanalytickou teorii Shoshany Felman. Felman hovoří o intenzitě účinku literárního díla jako o „poetickém efektu,“ jež v případě Bartlebyho spočívá v prázdnotě nacházející se v srdci textu. Bartleby je postavou, která se o svých motivacích nevyjadřuje. Nevíme, kým je, a proč koná tak, jak koná. Je to právě Bartlebyho nedostupnost, jež plodí nové a nové interpretace. Interpreti povídky tak (nevědomě) opakují chování samotného vypravěče, který se neustále snaží najít nějaké vysvětlení Bartlebyho jednání. Bartlebyovský kritik je chycen v pasti povídky, prázdnotou v jejím středu. Je konfrontován s vlastním interpretačním násilím, pokouší-li se tajemství Bartlebyho chování vysvětlit a tím toto tajemství zrušit. Sofistikovanější čtení, která tuto prázdnotu ctí, jsou abstraktní a spektrální a hrozí, že se zhroutí v mise en abyme.

Druhá kapitola se zabývá „Bartlebym“ jako klíčovou aluzí v literárních a uměleckých dílech. V románech *Život: návod k použití* George Pereca, *Bartleby & spol.* Enriqua Vila Matase a vizuálním díle *Popření* Etienna Chambauda se prázdnota v srdci příběhu podobá hudebnímu tématu, jež je variováno jak na úrovni formy, tak obsahu. V Perecově díle se Bartlebyho nedostupnost přetváří v podivnou mlčenlivost a nehybnost obrovského počtu postav, které tak připomínají voskové figuríny v muzeu. V případě románu *Bartleby & spol.* je zrcadlena v paradoxních osudech spisovatelů, kteří se rozhodli, že se již nebudou vyjadřovat pomocí literárních děl. To se týká i samotného vypravěče, čímž se problematizuje sám dotýčný text, jež odmítá svůj status literárního díla. Chambaudova práce *Popření* se opírá o nejednoznačnost Bartlebyho věty „Já bych raději ne,“ aby rozehrála impotentní a narcisistickou hru tvrzení a negace. Zmíněná díla s povídkou zacházejí způsobem, který umocňuje jejich vlastní sebe-podvracející strategie, pokusy zproblematizovat komunikaci s vnějším světem, nebo ji rovnou znemožnit. Zdůrazňují tak poetický a politický potenciál, který tkví v pasivitě, nesrozumitelnosti a nedostupnosti.

Subverzivní síla Bartlebyho pasivity se stává ústředním tématem rovněž v současné filozofii. Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben a Gilles Deleuze vytrhávají povídku z jejího literárního kontextu, aby jí jako klíčový díl vložili do skládačky svého vlastního filozofického „systému.“ V první řadě je přitom nezajímá povídka ve své významové bohatosti, ale její aplikace při řešení vzájemně souvisejících problémů ontologie, etiky a politiky. Jejich čtení se soustředí téměř výhradně na Bartlebyho větu „Já bych raději ne,“ kterou Deleuze pojmenoval jako Bartlebyho „formuli.“

V díle Slavoj Žižka, , kterým se zabývá třetí kapitola, vyjadřují literární příklady, mezi něž patří i „Bartleby,“ smysl celého jeho teoretického projektu – návrh účinného

politického jednání. Podle samotného Žižeka příklady konkrétní praxe vždy zároveň vyjevují zamlčené slepé uličky teorie, z níž se odvozují, což však platí i v jeho případě.

Literární příklady v Žižkově myšlení představují pud k smrti, nelidskou a monstrózní povahu subjektu, jež se nemůže nikdy zcela začlenit do žádné symbolické konfigurace. Jedná se díky tomu zároveň i o prostor propastné svobody, v němž je jakákoliv společenská realita radikálně zpochybněna a je možné nahlédnout dříve netušené možnosti.

Bartlebyho formule v podstatě překládá abstraktní teorii lidského subjektu do návrhu konkrétní politiky – „politiky ústupu.“ Bartlebyho „Já bych raději ne“ vyjadřuje radikální negativitu subjektu, je výrazem nevědomého pudu. Odráží lhostejnost vůči společenské realitě, jíž by měl být Bartleby součástí, vyslovuje svou nezávislost na vládnoucí ideologii a na ní parazitující opozici. Zobrazuje tak společenskou a politickou realitu v její nahodilosti, čímž zakládá jakoukoliv emancipační politiku.

Zůstává ale nejasné, jak je možné propojit pragmatické, taktické a vědomé aspekty politiky ústupu s těmi nevědomými. „Bartleby“ ztělesňuje selhání Žižkovy teorie zformulovat efektivní politický projekt, jelikož není zřetelné, jak v „nicnedělání“ rozlišit nevědomou fetišizaci kvietismu od radikálního aktu. Ukazuje se tu obtížnost sloučit svět pragmatické politiky a transcendentální prostor, nevědomí, reálno – jinými slovy politiku a filozofii. Na druhé straně lze tuto nekompatibilnost dvou světů chápat v duchu Žižkova „parallaxu“, nemožného spojení dvou neslučitelných sfér, které nám umožňuje vnímat každou z nich z nového hlediska. Skrze literární fikci můžeme zažít transcendentální podmínky naší existence (zážitek, který by jinak byl neúnosný), vnímat tak naši sociální a politickou realitu z odstupu a zpochybnit její samozřejmost. V důsledku lze literární příklady považovat za strategii, jež má umožnit teorii vyvolat ve svých recipientech politické a existenciální uvědomění.

Agambenovy časté odkazy k „Bartlebymu“ souvisí s obrovskou důležitostí, jež přikládá samotné literatuře. Literatura v jeho podání zprostředkovává jedinečný přístup k ontologicky prvotní zkušenosti jazyka – jazyka v jeho schopnosti komunikovat, bez ohledu na obsah toho, co konkrétně komunikuje. Literatura dokáže takovou zkušenost zprostředkovat, ale nemůže ji – na rozdíl od filozofie - myslet. Obojí najednou je možné jen v prostoru mezi literaturou a filozofií, prostřednictvím paradigmatu, což je funkce, jíž se „Bartleby“ ujímá v Agambenově díle.

Agambenovo čtení „Bartlebyho“ je sice mnohem sofistikovanější než Žižekovo, nakonec ho ale také zajímá především Bartlebyho formule, jíž chápe jako vyjádření Aristotelova konceptu potenciality - modelu poetické, etické a politické praxe. Klíčová je pro něj neochota písaře aktualizovat svůj potenciál (psát, odpovídat, odejít) a opustit tak sféru negativní potenciality, jež brání její aktualizaci. Tím stvrzuje prvenství potenciality existence před jakoukoliv její aktualizací. Díky negativní potencialitě zůstává písař z dosahu mocenských aparátů. Autorita konfrontována s postojem, který si nic jasného nenárokuje, nejedná a nekomunikuje, zůstává bezmocná, je deaktivována. Agamben ovšem nebere dostatečně v potaz Bartlebyho osamocenost a jeho tragický konec – smrti se podobající absolutní paralýzu. Je otázkou, jak koncept potenciality mohou využít emancipační hnutí. Pokud odpor vůči suverénní moci nutně končí destrukcí těch, kteří mu takto vzdorují, je otázkou, zda není předem předurčen k tragédii a neúspěchu.

Etika a politika potenciality se vyjevuje prostřednictvím (literárních) paradigmat. Paradigma je singulární fenomén poukazující na svou singularitu, čímž zakládá rozpoznatelnost kategorie, jejímž je příkladem. Abychom pochopili kontext, jenž díky němu vzniká, je třeba paradigma myslet, zakoušet – nejde tu o nějaké aplikovatelné pravidlo. Dobré paradigma je takové, které nám umožňuje vnímat naši situaci ve zcela novém světle. Má moc nás zasáhnout, zneklidnit, zpolitizovat. Paradigmatická metoda v

sobě ale obsahuje i určité násilí – dotyčný fenomén vyjímáme z jeho původního kontextu. Literatura, má-li se stát paradigmatickým ve filozofii, je autoritativním filozofickým aktem vytržena ze svého kontextu a ochuzena o svou významovou bohatost. V principu se jedná o stejnou sílu, jež tkví ve filozofickém universalismu. Filozofie chce poukázat na univerzální, generickou potencialitu, a tak nebere v úvahu konkrétní charakteristiky jednotlivých lidských životů.

Nejvlivnější filozofické čtení „Bartlebyho“ ale pochází z pera Gillesse Deleuze. Jím se zabývá pátá kapitola. Deleuzova studie „Bartlebyho“ se opírá o teze, formulované spolu s Félixem Guattari, týkající se takzvané „minoritní literatury.“ Teoretický rámec (deteritorializovaného jazyka, kolektivní a politické povahy minoritní literatury, její anticipace budoucí komunity), původně aplikovaný na dílo Franze Kafky, zde tvoří filozofické pozadí Deleuzova čtení.

Deleuze vnímá Bartlebyho jako revoluční postavu, mesiáše ohlašujícího novou společnost anarchistických individuí, jež je horizontálně strukturovaná. Rovněž Deleuzovo čtení se soustředí na Bartlebyho formuli, jíž vnímá jako společensky subverzivní. Formule ruší to, k čemu se odkazuje, stejně jako všechno ostatní, čemu by mohla dávat přednost, a tak narušuje veškeré významové vztahy a společenská pravidla podmíněná jazykem. Deleuze čte Bartlebyho formuli jako radikálně neurčitou. Nebere v úvahu vše, co Bartleby říká. Tím, že považuje jeho různorodé výroky jako varianty jedné, více méně neměnné formule, zjednodušuje Bartlebyho postoj.

Přestože Deleuze popírá, že texty „interpretuje,“ rozlišuje mezi legitimním a nelegitimním čtením textu. Vyjevuje se tu rozpor mezi tím, co Deleuze činí, a co tvrdí, že činí. Odmítá klasické estetické doktríny, ale nedokáže se jim zcela vyhnout. Jak ukazuje Jacques Rancière, velká pozornost, jíž Deleuze věnuje literární postavám, se ukazuje jako jeden z příkladů Deleuzova popíraného návratu k aristotelské estetice. Zatímco Deleuze a

Guattari na jedné straně jasně rozlišují mezi filozofií, jež vytváří koncepty, a uměním produkujícím afekty, Deleuzovo čtení „Bartlebyho“ naznačuje, že toto rozlišení není striktní. Literární postavy, obyvatelé uměleckých děl, jež souvisí s percepty a afekty, mohou být zároveň pojmovými postavami, subjekty filozofických výroků. Jejich vstup do prostoru filozofie je ale podmíněn proměnou – to, co není předmětem filozofického zájmu, je vypuštěno. Deleuze dramatizuje pojmy, aby je oživil, učinil z nich událost a nabídl je svým čtenářům k dalšímu experimentování. Umělecká díla zde slouží k tomu, aby komunikovala a živým způsobem zprostředkovávala koncepty, jimž však zůstává podřízena.

Podobně jako Žižek a Agamben ukládá Deleuze literatuře politický úkol. Literatura se odvolává na „lid, který teprve přijde.“ Jedná se o experiment navozující představu o alternativním společenství. „Bartleby,“ jak mu rozumí francouzský filozof, ohlašuje nové bratrství člověka, nový typ etiky. Není však jasné, jak by mohla být neurčitost Bartlebyho formule, její nerozhodnost, skutečně politicky efektivní. Není jasné, do jaké míry je Bartlebyho radikální lhostejnost schopná opravdu narušit staré pořádky nebo dokonce nastolit nový řád. V Deleuzově komentáři se vyjevuje obraz radostné komunity soudruhů osvobozených od hierarchie. Zároveň jakoby sám Deleuze stavěl překážky na cestě k poznání toho, jak jí dosáhnout. Ani Melvillova povídka ani Deleuzova interpretace nám nedává odpověď na otázku, jakým způsobem může tento Bartlebyho postoj napomoci k uskutečnění tohoto typu anarchistické komunity.

„Bartleby“ ve své roli literárního příkladu odhaluje napětí v srdci všech tří filozofií, jež ho využívají k tomu, aby prokázaly, že jsou politicky relevantní („Bartleby“ se objevuje vždy v místech, kde se jedná o politické důsledky dotyčné ontologie). Je jakousi Achillovou patou teorie, která registruje rozpory a nesrovnalosti v konceptuální kostře, čímž podřívá zdání filozofova mistrovství. V Agambenově myšlení poukazuje na

napětí v jeho paradigmatické metodě – jedná se o singularitu fenoménu, jež je vytržený ze svého kontextu, aby mohl vyjavit jiné skutečnosti. Agamben zároveň tvrdí, že jedinečnost takového fenoménu, jeho ukotvenost v konkrétní situaci, ctí. Jak se ale ukazuje, v případě paradigmatických literárních lze hovořit o účtě k jejich literární jedinečnosti jen těžko. Dále se tu jedná o problém modelu politického jednání, který je prezentován prostřednictvím figury sebe-destruktivního pisáře. To platí i u obou dalších filozofiích.

V Žižekově myšlení poukazuje Bartlebyho příklad na rozpolcenost mezi literaturou jako modelem etického a politického jednání k následování na jedné straně a transformační, očištné zkušenosti, jejíž důsledky však nelze předvídat, na straně druhé. Podobně v Deleuzově díle vyjevuje literární příklad konflikt mezi pocíťovanou naléhavostí potřeb komunity, k níž se filozof obrací, a kontemplací virtuálního, jež ale předpokládá fundamentální odcizení se od dotyčné komunity jako podmínky myšlení alternativ, jež by nebyly jen variantou statusu quo. Politický projekt, jež „Bartleby“ představuje, je tak vnitřně rozpolcen. Na jednu stranu je představen jako ideální model politického jednání. Vezmeme-li ale v úvahu části textu, které filozofové neberou dostatečně v potaz – Bartlebyho sebe-zničující tendence a jeho izolovanost - jedná se o model, který nelze následovat. Navíc zůstává nejasné, jak by to, co podle filozofů podmiňuje skutečně autentickou etiku a politiku (a co se skrývá za Bartlebyho chováním, ať už jde o pud k smrti, potencialitu nebo radikální imanenci), mělo inspirovat emancipační hnutí, když se to neslučuje s vědomou vůlí. Takový model zůstává vně politické sféry, jež vyžaduje cílevědomé kolektivní jednání. Zároveň se „Bartleby“ nachází v sublimním prostoru, kde se očekává, že čtenáři zažijí zásadní proměnu perspektivy, jejíž dopady nelze předvídat. Přítomnost „Bartlebyho“ ve filozofii naznačuje specifické porozumění této disciplíně. Filozofie je chápána především jako intervence do čtenářova světa. Takové užití v sobě skrývá násilí – „Bartleby“ exemplifikuje klíčové

teoretické koncepce, ale zároveň je nevybíravě vytržen ze svého literárního kontextu.

Teorie zachází s literaturou *násilným* způsobem, aby *donutila* své čtenáře myslet.

Provokativní rozporuplnost promluvy Žižekovského filozofa-psychoanalytika, nedorečenost Agambenových paradigmat a odtazitost Deleuzova filozofa-umělcem-vizionáře nejsou nepodobné Bartlebyho znepokojivé osamělosti, nedostupnosti a neproniknutelnosti. „Bartleby“ se stává zrcadlem, v němž se odráží ambivalentní vztah filozofa a společnosti, k němuž se obrací. Jednotlivá čtení jsou svým způsobem portréty filozofů samotných, místa nejednoznačných setkání mezi literaturou, filozofií a politikou.

Pro kulturu na počátku 21. století, umělce, filozofy, aktivisty se „Bartleby“ stal vlivným symbolem etické, autentické opozice vůči moci. Stal se symbolem etiky a politiky, jež poněkud nečekaně klade důraz na sílu netečnosti, pasivity a nesrozumitelnosti. Tyto strategie využívají aktivisté jakož i zmíněná umělecká a teoretická díla. Současná literatura a umění se odkazují k „Bartlebymu“, aby zdůraznila poetickou a etickou sílu spočívající v odmítnutí prosazovat sebe sama, svou autoritu (uměleckého díla). Podobně političtí teoretici a levicoví aktivisté vidí v Bartlebym postavu, která předjímá jejich vlastní představy o autentické etice a politice. Zatímco se bartlebyovské strategie ukazují být efektivními poetickými prostředky, jejich funkce ve světě politiky se jeví v problematičtějším světle.

Apropriace povídky umělci, aktivisty a filozofy vyvolává otázky ohledně autonomie literatury a společenské funkce literárního textu. Tyto způsoby čtení jsou totiž otevřeně ne-exegetické, tzn. nezaměřují se na zkoumání významové bohatosti dotyčného textu. Jsou ahistorické a nekontextuální – obrovské rozdíly mezi Melvillovou dobou a současností tu nehrají roli.

Literatura tak na jedné straně ztrácí svou autonomii, na straně druhé získává novou relevanci, novou funkci v jiné disciplíně – politickém aktivismu, filozofii, umění, jež jí

využívají ke svým vlastním účelům. Tato nově nabytá společenská důležitost musí nutně těšit každého, kdo věří v závažnost a význam literatury. Zároveň se literatura tomuto užití vzpouzí, zejména v případě zde rozebíraného politického aktivismu a filozofie. To, co se do těchto čtení nevejde, zůstává vně obrazu těmito disciplínami vytvořeného a problematizuje ho. Vyjevují se tak diskutabilní aspekty politiky, jež zmíněná filozofie představuje svým čtenářům, složitost a nejednoznačnost soužití umění a filozofie na jedné straně a politiky na druhé.